

might find a balance in the middle of the chaos by
stardustupinlights

Category: Yu-Gi-Oh! VRAINS

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Summary:

In which Yusaku got his DNA messed up with, he's trying to find answers, Takeru is always late and he now has an alien child. Or something like that.

(He also may be falling in love with someone he shouldn't.)

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1. sense of justice (origin)

Author's Note:

You can all blame scratchienails. I hope you like this. This is all exposition guys I'm not even kidding xD.

I hope you enjoy!

The first few times Yusaku bothers to try out vigilantism, he isn't doing it out of the goodness of his heart or a sense of justice— well, perhaps that last part isn't completely accurate, but the important thing to note here is that his only goal is revenge. He's clumsy at first and way too reckless; the police almost caught him about four times in his first two weeks, which is about two too many for his taste, but back then he didn't have the equipment, the knowledge or the experience he has now. It also never truly hit him that what he was doing was in fact punished by law until he was being held off at gunpoint by a special police unit, but even then he didn't really *care* that much.

Their reluctance to accept vigilantism as part of the city's day to day life never lasted long in regards to him anyways, since he was too good at escaping their grasp and also not the first freak going around messing up criminal activity. He wouldn't be the last either.

Yusaku didn't have a name at first. If someone, some scared and shaken citizen asked about it, Yusaku would normally just shrug and leave. They came to give him several nicknames as a way to process the fact that a seemingly young teenager just saved their ass, but the tabloids loved to call him '*UNKNOWN*', a name Yusaku thought was a bit too pretentious. It's not like he could do anything about it though. It was either that or something like '*Shadowman*' or '*Mystery Man*', some of the other less fortunate suggestions, and he was not going to accept such an awful, meaningless alias. '*UNKNOWN*' was at least kind of cool-sounding, and fitted his objective; Yusaku did not want or need the recognition of public, but he got it anyways.

Yusaku was young when he started— around fourteen. No parents, barely a place to live, no money but a lot of fury and questions and abilities he couldn't understand. He also wanted revenge, and most importantly, answers, to know why he is the way he is, why he and other five children were targeted, what exactly happened, who was behind it all, what their goal was and *who saved them*. His memories of the incident were fuzzy, but the torture, the probing, the testing— that was always fresh in his nightmares. The only positive he could find in all that negative were the voices in his head keeping him from breaking and going absolutely nuts, but he couldn't even be sure if they were both real. One is still there, but the other...

It's probably what kept him going all those years, what made him sneak out to street fights to learn about the underground dealings of Den City, to join a hacker posing as a hotdog vendor as his assistant, to train and push himself until he could barely stand on his feet every day. The voice in the back of his mind encouraged him all the way, keeping him motivated, and the memory of someone else's filled him with a certain sense of urgency to find them he could never get rid of.

He never got attached to any of his foster homes because he didn't know how to interact with them at all. He was told that it would only be temporary, that he would be moved somewhere more '*appropriate*' every time the families felt like Yusaku was too much to deal with. Told that there was nothing to worry about, that he would eventually be adopted.

Not that Yusaku could blame them; ever since he came back from being experimented on by mad scientists that claimed they would bring forth a new generation of humans there was something off about him that made them all keep their distance. Not that they *knew* he had been an unwilling guinea pig, since the general public and the parents were sold a story about a serial kidnapper making their way around the country to sell children in a human trafficking ring and all the events were swept under the rug, never to be spoken of again. The names of the victims weren't released, but it didn't matter. People didn't need to know what actually happened for him to be pointed at and gossiped about. If freak shows were still legal, maybe that's where he would have ended up.

It probably looked easy on the outside, to be the odd one out, but it wasn't. The first time he stepped into a shadow and came out through another, there was no one there to see him have a panic attack over it. He was a kid all alone, and no amount of superpowers would ever fix that. Not the strength, not the speed, not the healing and not the uncanny sixth sense for danger.

There was an emptiness to his life that wasn't there before the experiments. Yusaku was still parentless, but that didn't seem too bad before, when he was around other kids all the time and had loving caretakers at the orphanage. That was the first thing that changed. Government influence made sure nothing about the incident got out, the name of the organization responsible disappearing from any existing registry, and that no one got close to him for more than short periods of time. Yusaku was left by himself to get over his issues, since he could trust no one. Other than the monthly testing by their approved scientists to ensure nothing was amiss, he never got to hear anything about the other kids and he wasn't allowed to search them out. The relocations were common and numerous; Yusaku didn't get to memorize faces to be able to point them out from a crowd before he was being taken to the other side of the country again. Therapy was almost worthless for him; no one in the list of government-issued therapists knew how to deal with a victim of human experimentation, but he suspected after a while that he wasn't the only one with problems talking to other people about the hazy memories.

To this day Yusaku couldn't decide if the isolation from other people was worse than the torture. On most days, he could stand being alone. On others, his skin crawled with unknown needs and that voice deep in the back of his mind called for him, telling him to look, to search, to find the source. He didn't exactly know what that voice was back then, only that it needed him, but it wasn't long before doctors tried to drug him into normalcy and Yusaku had to start throwing pills down the drain at the tender age of nine.

I'm not crazy, Yusaku repeated to himself every single day, noticing odd changes in the adults' speech patterns every time someone brought up where he went off to for six months, confirming his suspicions that something was off, that it wasn't all in his mind. In school, he was the

resident puzzle piece that didn't fit in, that had a missing screw; Yusaku eventually stopped caring and talked to them in that foreign language the voice whispered in his ear to scare them away. It was all gibberish to them, but Yusaku could almost understand some of it, if he focused.

Yusaku forgot was childish happiness felt like really quickly, and wasn't familiar with any similar feeling for the longest time.

The trauma of the situation, the nightmares that came with the PTSD, the pain that randomly struck his body at times, the flashbacks and his isolation from people he knew never really faded as much as they became a part of him that he adapted to with time. He learned to bear both the emotional and physical pain, to not let it hinder him, and became skilled in things like cooking, despite his dislike for it, money management, coding, *hacking*, and maintained his grades in school while working part-time jobs that were of dubious legality on the internet, all while he was still a kid. An angry one, but a kid.

He was careful about it at the beginning, logging into encrypted sessions, using VPNs and incognito modes, really any mean of making his presence unknown, because he was wary of the government's watchful eye over him. Kusanagi-san was as nice as he was sneaky; Yusaku learned most of what he knew from him, once he got over his hang-ups with letting a child dive into the criminal world like that. That his brother was another victim was just proof fate put him on the right path. Yusaku just added Jin's delicate existence to his list of reasons why he wouldn't let anyone get away with all this.

He started to investigate on the field shortly after he got his ninth med prescription in a span of five years from age nine to fourteen. It wasn't easy, because no one wanted him out of their sight in fear of him going missing again or going completely off the rails. The public library proved to be inefficient for the first time in his life, as did any cyber cafes, but that's how he learned to look deeper into things, to push his own boundaries—what he wanted wasn't easy to find, wasn't visible to the naked eye. Only he could connect such dots.

A suspicious headline on a newspaper only a month before the day of his kidnapping. Numerous interviews with one particular group of doctors about their future projects. Hypothesis about what could come next in human evolution from the same group of scientists. Founding for a new project getting approved and then cancelled, all other mentions of it disappearing. A memorial with only a few people in attendance in contrast to a funeral full of grieving familiars of a dead child.

It was almost ridiculously easy then, once Yusaku ventured out into the streets and left behind his discomfort with using his powers against people, of getting into the accounts and disks of government officials and striking deals with bounty hunters, to find a name: Kogami Kiyoshi, dead at 43. Divorced from a wife that died in a suspicious car accident shortly after the son was born. Almost got arrested for going against basic human rights during the early stages of testing a new medicinal drug just five years prior to his kidnapping. Allegedly fired because of moral differences with his boss.

If not the perpetrator, then certainly involved.

He could find nothing and no one that knew about the organization responsible. A questionable doctor with a shady past and a strangled relationship with his son wasn't that much of a red flag, but he had a hunch. So, he followed it and kept looking; he may know *who*, but he needed the *why*. Human evolution is one thing, but there must have been something that pushed those scientists to break all their rules just to achieve this: an angry teenager with shadow manipulation powers looking to make them pay and lots of prison sentences.

Yusaku almost laughed out loud when one year into his investigative vigilantism a guy trying to steal some DNA from the city mayor let it slip operations never ceased for the organization that kidnapped him. It was ridiculously easy to pull the information out of him, straddling his back and twisting his arm painfully to get him to talk in the middle of the mayor's office, glass digging into his face; he didn't even need to use his powers on him seriously. He barked all he knew out with such deep fear in his voice that Yusaku was actually momentarily disgusted with himself, before he remembered his anger was justified and he would never kill anyone

anyways, not like this guy, who apparently had been tasked with stealing the DNA so they could *clone the mayor*. Funny plan, but he was more interested in unlocking his own backstory.

Aliens. Who would have thought? He had assumed his weirdness was a completely man-made development, but this explained much more about him, about the voice that never left, about the peculiar changes he went through physically that required him to train himself. He was experimented on and linked to an alien AI that wanted him to find their physical form. How odd but *useful*, not to mention a bit shocking, even if it was annoying in the beginning to train his body as a way of spending all of his extra, pent up energy and signing up to martial arts lessons and personal defense, asking his current guardians to *please* let him get some light gym equipment, like yoga mats and weights. All of it to discover he wasn't going through a weird phase, but a *biological evolution*. Go figure; those crazy scientists were actually successful at creating a new type of human.

Since he wasn't able to give him more information and didn't even know the *name* of the organization, he let the guy escape for the sake of making whoever was bossing him around know there was someone looking for them, to send a message, but he showed up dead not a week later. For fifteen-year-old Yusaku, this wasn't a good thing— someone was dead because he got a bit too curious about things he shouldn't be involved in, that he should have let rest and buried, but as the years passed and the events leading up to his actual debut as a hero came, he started to accept not everyone could be saved and not everyone was worthy of saving. It was a hard reality, the one he lived in, but it was the only way he could get up in the morning and get through the day. He had three goals in mind:

1. Find out the truth.
2. Make the one who did this pay.
3. Figure out whether the person who saved him was alive to thank them.

He never quite liked the title of hero. It's too restrictive—you save one cat from a tree, stop a couple of assassinations and a broken, guilt-ridden lady from releasing a computer virus into the world and suddenly you're a role model. He wasn't the first, of course, that title was to the ever glorious Go Onizuka, who decided crime in Den City was ridiculously high—he wasn't

wrong; back when he debuted Den City was avoided like the plague by tourists – but didn't have the brain to hide behind a mask like him and his eventual half-replacement, a flying girl that went with around three different names, did. Watching Go eventually become obsessed with being a hero was sad but predictable; Yusaku didn't have time to be sorry about those who only helped the little guy to appear like the best.

Playmaker. Yusaku couldn't help but actually grin at that one.

It had a nice ring to it, even if it was a bit too similar to his given name. He came to like it thanks to Kusanagi-san's constant reinforcement that becoming a recognized hero was somehow a good thing; Yusaku didn't see the point at the beginning since he wasn't looking to protect anyone but himself and maybe some very few select individuals. By the time his name becomes common knowledge among the citizens he's seventeen and has already gotten dozens of offers to patrol the city together at night by some rookie hero that was just afraid of getting caught by the police or attacked by an actually dangerous villain. He's been doing this for a while; that he was underground before didn't make a difference.

Den City was weird like that. As far as he knew, it was one of the very little numbers of cities in the world that had actual super-powered individuals going around on spandex and jumping from tall buildings like it was nothing. Playmaker was a loner— in a reality where freaks like him showed up about once every month or so, he was the only one that stuck to his own lane, focusing more on his personal mission but sending them relevant information and helping out when he could or felt like it. Where Blue Angel became pretty much an Idol and Go Onizuka was given the keys to the city, he lurked in the shadows and came out mostly at night, following the traces of his past and taking down drug and human trafficking rings by himself. He eventually became more open to helping out, since it felt wrong not to, but his hesitation to work with anyone is still there and very real.

In short, Yusaku wasn't interested in the benefits of Playmaker becoming a symbol, but he was left very little choice six months into his heroing when the first vestiges of the Knights of Hanoi began to crawl their way out of the darkest corners of Den City's criminal activity, bringing chaos with them and serving as another recovered missing puzzle piece to fit his actual

mission, moving on from being just a ghost organization in his mind responsible for the dark turn his life took to a very real, present danger during his day to day life.

Bioterrorists. They believed their viruses would accelerate human evolution and weren't shy about illegally testing them on unwilling people, much like they did with him. *As if*, Yusaku thought when he first stopped one of their smallest groups from exploding a bioweapon in the middle of downtown during the rush hour. Not only that, the Knights of Hanoi only made villain activity *worse*, and he did not appreciate it at all. He was also kind of disappointed he couldn't figure out the name by himself, but that just confirmed his suspicions about Kogami Kiyoshi, once he started to look deeper into them to find rumors and old files of him listed as their founder.

The investigation at some point took him to his top secret government file, which was pretty laughable: he was deemed as a high-level threat and yet all it took to take him down was a phone call to the right emergency number and a suspicious accident Yusaku could trace the origins of to his parent company— SOL Technologies, a capitalistic entity that claimed they just wanted to make new software and hardware to help humanity evolve but that was suspected to be involved in selling illegal weapons to the highest bidder. Weapons Hanoi absolutely loved to buy and '*improve*'.

Yusaku made it part of his mission to take them all down. He didn't want a nuclear war, thank you, but the Knights of Hanoi were his priority, now that he could put a name to what had been until then one of his biggest questions in regards to his kidnapping. Next business in order: tracking down their current leader. They are bound to know more about the alien experimentation.

Dealing with them was not easy, though. Somehow, despite Yusaku being really acclimated to Den City's underground crime and having contacts all around, they never got into his or anyone else's radar until they were right there trying to spread a virus. They also increased in worryingly fast numbers despite the efforts he put into tracking down their shady warehouses and experimentation labs. It was this that forced him to officially team up with Go Onizuka and Blue Angel for the first time.

It was horrible. Go was his complete opposite, but at least he got his part of the job done. Yusaku wondered how people could even stand seeing someone like him pretend to not be literally the strongest human alive just for the sake of being mildly entertaining; Go hulked over most people not only with the sheer strength and size of his muscles but also with his outgoing personality, so it was a bit embarrassing to watch him pretend any of Hanoi's weapons could penetrate his skin or do more than momentarily confuse him. Yusaku came to somewhat respect the message he wanted people to gather from his actions, to not kick the little man down or something, but he was too busy with trying to balance his seventh semester at university with his part-time job at Kusanagi-san's and his little hunt down of Hanoi to care about his personal morals in depth.

Not to mention Go's outfits were a bit too much, but he really isn't one to talk. Finding out his own could actually change his hair color was great, but he became uninspired beyond that when he officially started to act like a hero. He could admit his bodysuit was questionable – Kusanagi-san told him as much – but he wasn't ashamed. He couldn't be when Blue Angel went around on a knee-high dress at times; if she could stand that then he could pretend people didn't whistle at him on the streets when he was minding his saving people business. Besides, it was made with stolen alien fabric he found on a government warehouse of confiscated goods. It probably belonged to Hanoi at some point, which only makes the steal better. Good luck peeling that off him, villains; Yusaku sometimes forgets how to take it off himself and has to go to his morning classes with it underneath a sweater and gloves despite being the middle of the summer. The super-intelligent fabric was both a blessing and a curse.

Blue Angel was another thing altogether— too stubborn and too eager to please, not that reckless but certainly lacking Go's experience and confidence. She wasn't ever a damsel in distress, thank goodness, but it got annoying when she was struck by that need to be both a hero and an Idol. Yusaku couldn't really dislike any of them, since they were actually doing most of the '*saving people, being a good role model*' part and he was doing more of the '*I know who we have to save them from*' part. He was as dependent on them to not have to take care of everything by himself as they

were of him giving them the necessary information to act while first knowing the full picture of the situation.

They weren't the only ones, of course—Den City is full of aspiring heroes and just as many villains and in-betweens. Ghost Girl was probably smacked right on the center of the spectrum, half of the time a hero for hire and half of the time a bounty hunter. Soulburner though, in Yusaku's honest opinion, is a *blessing*; not only can he listen to him better than any other hero around and actually be helpful instead of a nuisance, but he's also a victim of the Hanoi experiments. They met when Takeru quite literally crashed into him during an attack to the main plaza, making them both fall down into the ground and Yusaku get an ugly bruise in his nose.

He was about to glare at him with the intensity of his '*I haven't had a good week but you just made it worse*' glare when their eyes met and a feeling of recognition ran over the both of them, making them pause.

"Oh," Soulburner had said, and Yusaku related to the simplicity of it, even as he accepted his hand to get up off the ground.

"You're like me." Was his only answer. It didn't take them long to become practically official partners after that, and just as much time to meet outside the field and become actual friends. Takeru transferring universities to operate in Den City full time was perhaps a bit much, though, but he was grateful for it nonetheless.

Then there were those like Blood Shepherd and Revolver— but Yusaku wasn't going to think about them much. They are their own mystery and phenomenon apart from everyone else. Blood Shepherd is Ghost Girl's business, and Revolver, well...he isn't anyone's business but his own. No one else is as deeply into his strange, far and in-between, helpful but confusing and insulting appearances as he is. It's that odd, mutual understanding of each other they have every time they talk that keeps Yusaku from actually fully disliking him.

The legality of the actions of people like them were even more questionable than those of hero-vigilantes and perhaps even the villains. Blood Shepherd was also smacked in the middle of the hero-villain spectrum, but unlike

Ghost Girl leaned more towards full-on mercenary. There was no stopping him when she had such a tight leash on that case— just like he did with Revolver's.

Revolver. Every time Yusaku thinks about him his mind descends into a swirling mess of questions and half-baked theories. He's somehow related to the Hanoi experiments of sixteen years ago, the one question he has answered for him since knowing each other for about five years, ever since Hanoi appeared, but he hasn't been able to figure out how, or what he is looking for. He is, as far as Yusaku can tell, even deeper into the shadows that he was when he learned how to not draw attention to himself, in his times as an underground vigilante. He has no idea how he manages that, and every time he tries to create a personality profile drawing traits from his interactions with him and from others' comments about him he comes up with at least four different files filled with possibilities to what Revolver's life might be behind his weird, freaky alien mask and his husky voice.

Yusaku always draws the same conclusion: it doesn't matter. Whoever Revolver is, he's probably just trying to the same thing as him and get revenge on Hanoi, might even be a victim himself. And whatever connection they have—

Well, Yusaku isn't about to catch feelings. Not this far into the game.

2. first contact

Notes for the Chapter:

And I'm back with a chapter twice the length of the first one! Some actual doing in this chapter, some plot progression, too many "Ai is Yusaku's child" jokes. Enjoy!

Also, Celepom is responsible for this not being a mess. Thank you, you're an angel, as always.

He only reaches a breakthrough in his now five-year-long investigation into Hanoi's motives for human-alien experimentation when he almost steps on a snake during one of their attacks. Except it wasn't a snake, and he didn't almost step on it; he most certainly fell on top of it after being blasted through a wall by one of Hanoi's fancy new people-murdering weapons he got to be the test subject for, and he will never forget how disgusting that felt afterwards, when the remaining bits peeled off his skin and went slithering away through a pipe.

Well then, was the thought that crossed his mind as he decided to follow it, *if I die I die.* His day has been less than ideal; waking up at 9 am to find a terrorist group that's been the bane of his existence going all out was not fun. He was trying to stop them before lunch, but when something weird happens he needs to figure out the origin before it comes back to bite him in the ass so he might as well go for it and chase that thing.

He *probably* shouldn't leave in the middle of a Hanoi attack, but there are enough heroes and vigilantes out and about to handle them while he investigated another one of Den City's weird occurrences. He's been researching the origins for increasing superhuman activity since Kusanagisan was able to get them a decent scheming space – an underground apartment that was not cheap; Yusaku's wallet is still weeping – so they could tackle more issues at once, and a particular question has been in his mind for a while.

What is so important about Den City's population to be the testing ground for Hanoi? Their large scale attacks were always directed at some of the city's more populated areas, like parks, campuses, gardens, downtown—Hanoi rarely bothered to attack any other neighboring cities or towns, and when they did it was mostly for collecting resources. He doesn't know what he's expecting out of following this jelly thing around as chaos breaks out and Go Onizuka screams for him, asking him if he's fine to get no answer because he's focused, but he's curious.

It could be related to Hanoi, after all—Yusaku doesn't like to leave loose ends.

The jelly-like bits take him into the city's sewers, which isn't encouraging. He's had some interesting experiences down in these sewers, but that doesn't mean they were good ones. The image of Soulburner's panicked eyes after almost burning him while both of them were covered in flammable sewer waste will never leave his mind.

He became even more suspicious of the situation when the little voice in the back of his mind, that's been mostly dormant over the last few years, starts to increase in volume to the point in which he can barely walk, talking to him in that language he can barely understand. A headache threatens to pull him down, but he keeps going. Kusanagi-san's voice in his earpiece is inaudible and stays that way during the entire ordeal, making him feel anxious. For all he knows, he could be walking into an elaborate Hanoi trap. Sounds fun.

He isn't feeling any better by the time he reaches a dead end covered in more of that sentient jelly substance. It's a bit too dark to really examine it from afar, but it smells suspiciously like mold, so before doing the heroic and crazy thing by approaching it, Yusaku pulls on his suit fabric so the turtleneck stretches and covers his mouth and nose, lest he catch something down here.

Yusaku hesitates before pulling out his flashlight. He doesn't really need it — his superhuman senses allowed him to see well enough to distinguish the purplish-black color of the substance and the slight shine to it, but he doesn't want to miss any details. His headache, thankfully, has been slowly

dying out, the sound of the water of the sewage system filling his ears instead, but there's still nothing from Kusanagi-san but static.

Shrugging and looking around for a stick only to find none, Yusaku steps closer to the substance and pokes it with a finger.

The whole thing moves with an incredibly loud, wet sound, shivering all over and unsticking itself from the wall, falling into the ground. Yusaku now regrets leaving Go and Blue Angel on the city streets instead of sending *them* to investigate; he'd rather be thrown through walls again than deal with *this*.

Still making perturbing, non-stop noise, the thing slowly starts to increase its luminosity until it's emitting a purple light, that brightens and dims, almost like a heartbeat. The thing reduces in size until it's nothing but a blob in the ground, about the size of a baseball.

He waits in silence for a few seconds, but when nothing happens, Yusaku sighs and crouches, pointing the flashlight right at it. It's looking a bit smoother now, rubber-like and perfectly round with a few purple markings around it – it really is a baseball – but it still does nothing.

Well, Yusaku thinks, reaching out to grab it, here goes nothing.

He doesn't get a chance a touch it before it jumps, startling him backwards and making him stand up fully, ready to take full advantage of the dark and make good use of his abilities. It jumps again, and then three more times, its shape reforming until it falls into the ground for one last time and Yusaku is left staring, a bit shocked, at what resembles a little humanoid-looking... *thing*, with black, rubber-like skin, shiny yellow eyes and purple streaks all over, just like the ball. It's barely taller than the length of his hand, and as soon as it looks up at him with evident happiness, Yusaku feels something inside him snap into place. The voice in his brain finally silent for the first time since the Hanoi incident and allowing him to just enjoy the quiet as the thing stares at him and he stares back.

Unfortunately, it speaks.

“Playmaker-sama!” The thing screams, so Yusaku takes one calculated step back. Perhaps he was not as ready to deal with aliens as he thought. “It’s me! I’m so happy I found you!”

The thing waves its little arms around and forms a heart over its head, winking at him. Yusaku regrets many, many things right now, like being born.

The sense of familiarity he feels towards this thing though, makes him wonder if he somehow forgot about meeting it before, deciding it was very possible he had just deleted the memory from his mind if it went anything like this. He settles for his trademark deadpan, glaring at it until it makes a little ‘*yeep!*’ sound and literally braces itself, sticky arms around its body. “Do I know you?”

The little thing falls dramatically to its knees. Yusaku almost lets out a mildly disgusted sound at it landing on a wet sewer spot, but it clearly didn’t care about that.

“You wound me! I’m your son!” The thing cries, and Yusaku almost turns around to leave right there. “Don’t you remember me? It’s barely been like, a decade and a half!”

A decade and a half, huh? Yusaku could probably work with that. It was kind of obvious that he had somehow stumbled upon alien life growing on Den City’s sewer system. Who knew? He wonders if Hanoi does, since they seem really negligent about their past experiments.

“Are you related to that incident?” He asks, not softening his voice or relaxing. The quiet in his mind is as refreshing as it is foreign, and it makes him uneasy. The thing nods enthusiastically. That was something at least; another piece to fit into the puzzle. “How related?”

“I was born that day! Or well, actually, I was technically born just know, but I’ve been alive since that day!” The little thing takes another step closer to him, and Yusaku feels vaguely threatened before he remembers he has a Taser with him. Good thing he grabbed it this morning. “You’re kind of my mom!”

“What do you mean by that? I can’t carry children,” Yusaku shakes his head, bringing a hand up to fumble with his earpiece. Kusanagi-san is still quiet, which can’t be good. He would have probably remembered Yusaku mentioning giving birth at some point. “And you’re *obviously* not human. How exactly are you related to the incident?”

The thing shoots him a sheepish look. “It’s a bit complicated, but you didn’t actually biologically, humanly gave birth to me—I was born out of your consciousness! That little voice in your head—me!”

Yusaku is starting to feel strangely tired of this conversation. “Are you the alien that I got my DNA spliced with, then?”

“You know about that? Nice, I don’t actually have to explain that much stuff to you now,” Yusaku opens his mouth to ask just *how much* it knows about the incident, but he has no time before a loud ‘*BOOM!*’ shakes the ground above them. Right, Hanoi was testing weapons and Go was around to take the bulk of it. That might not end well. “Hey, they’re still going at it?”

Without thinking much about it, Yusaku bends down and grabs the alleged alien around the middle, almost cringing at how sticky-cold it feels even through the fabric of his suit, but he has no time to dwell on it. He needs to get to a service exit, otherwise, Den City might just get blown up by the shared efforts of rookie heroes not caring about property damage, Go taking care of as many of them as he can at a time, and the Knights of Hanoi going mad with their fancy new toys.

So, without listening to the complaints he is receiving about harassment — *how the fuck does an alien know about any of that* — Yusaku uses some of his bodysuit fabric to tie up his new source of information, barely having to think about it before it’s done. The perks of alien technology.

It doesn’t work out like he thought it would. “Hey! I know this thing. It’s cozy.”

The alien wiggles around in his hand and Yusaku watches in horror as it starts to melt into his suit to the point in which it disappears inside it, not

modifying the color or the pattern but making a shiver run down his spine at the sudden weird feeling he gets, like someone just ran a hand down his back. The thing lets out a joyful laugh.

"What did you do to my suit?" His voice sounds deeply disturbed; Yusaku would have to deny being fazed by this later.

"I would explain more if we had time, but basically this fabric is made to host me!" Yusaku ignores the perturbed feeling he gets at the words. Host alien life? He was definitely not as prepared as he thought he would be for this. He hopes this suit thing will not become a permanent arrangement.

"I'll ask later," Yusaku looks around and then quickly starts to make his way back to where he came from, silently wishing Kusanagi-san were freaking out with him in his ear. Why is he not saying anything? Is his earpiece broken? Regardless, he knew he couldn't keep addressing alien life acclimated enough to the Earth's culture to know what winking and arm hearts are like an '*it*'. That would probably be offensive.

"Do you have a name...?" Yusaku pauses for a second, hesitating on the question. This is weird. "...or a gender preference?"

The alien makes a humming sound, and Yusaku feels it everywhere. Fuck, this is so weird. "Human gender seems unimportant but I guess to avoid complications I should go for one." It quiets down for a few merciful seconds, and then almost scares the shit out of Yusaku by talking so loudly it echoes across the sewer tunnel he's heading through. "Yours looks OK! You're a '*he*', right?"

Yusaku's eyebrow twitches. "Yes, I am."

"So I'm a boy! Congratulations on the bouncing baby boy," he giggles. Yusaku really regrets getting up in the morning. The alien's voice is playful with his next question: "Aren't you a happy momma?"

Yusaku sighs. Maybe he should skip town and get a new identity. Forget Den City; Domino doesn't have this kind of shit going on. "Name?"

“Human names are complicated,” he says, and Yusaku cringes at how much he drags the ‘o’. He’s an incredibly obnoxious alien, apparently. “But I’d like one! How about—”

“I’m calling you Ai,” Yusaku interrupts, shining his flashlight upwards once he spies the shape of an exit. Now, to open it.

“What? That’s lame!” Ai complains, but Yusaku’s too busy estimating how high he has to jump and how hard he has to hit the metal for it to open. Actually, maybe his new companion could be of some assistance. “I have a right to pick my name! Where did you even got that from?”

Yusaku sighs, a long-suffering sound that would make people about to die dramatically quite jealous. “It’s a pun. Now, does your addition to my suit have any perks?”

“Eh, I guess—”

“Can you open that manhole cover for me?” Yusaku doesn’t even know how Ai is seeing anything, to be honest. He hopes he’s not somehow seeing through his eyes, since that would be intrusive. “I could jump and hit it, but I would rather not risk a broken wrist.”

Instead of answering, Ai’s little shape suddenly appears sitting on top of his wrist, a hand against his chin, yellow eyes narrowing in thought as he states at the entrance like he’s trying to solve a complicated math equation and hesitating. When his expression clears, he looks mischievous. Yusaku has a bad feeling about this.

“Ah, I see. Well, don’t freak out, give me a second.”

Yusaku decides at that moment that he will never trust an alien if they tell him not to freak out ever again. In all honesty, he could have opened that exit by himself no problem without even breaking a sweat, but he is curious about Ai, and this is what he gets: to watch a little, seemingly inoffensive alien grow in size and become jelly for a few long seconds, reforming to the point in which he’s now staring at something at least three times his size,

with a huge mouth and teeth and humid breath, hitting the heavy metal cover with a tentacle.

Ai clearly struggles with it, letting out dramatic sounds and curses as he raises another sticky-looking tentacle to hit it again until it loosens up just enough for a bit of light to fall into the sewer. With the light comes the sound of people screaming, which immediately puts him on edge, but he's inconveniently distracted by Ai's giant shape.

At least he managed to open it, Yusaku thinks, feeling momentarily dizzy. Now he could just jump and grab the edge, but he has too many questions about this new... *development* to just ignore what happened. Ai just goes back to his previous form like it's no big deal, giving him a thumbs up and somehow managing to convey the illusion of a grin, despite having no mouth.

“Did you just turn into a monster?”

Ai’s apparent grin turns into a frown. “Rude! That’s just one of my forms. I can turn into kitties, too!”

Kitties. Uh. Well, at least he now knows he won’t have trouble explaining Ai to Kusanagi-san and their landlord. He will not be happy to have yet another roommate. He wonders if Ai will make an ugly cat. “What do you eat? If you say humans, I’m going to Taser you.”

“Well, I don’t really need to eat to be honest, since you being alive equals me surviving, but I sure enjoy it!”

Ah, bold of him to assume a life form different from humans needs to eat. Shrugging, Yusaku crouches down and squints at that bit of light, bracing himself to jump. When he does, he manages to grab onto the edge of the concrete above and climb up without issue, pushing the manhole away as he goes, his movements a bit more frantic than usual because there shouldn’t be any villains on this street—

Chaos surrounds him.

No, really, things are burning in the street and there are people screaming and running in the opposite direction of the biggest fire. A few people recognize him and whoop in apparent happiness at their chances of dying reducing, but Yusaku is too busy staring at the massive, terrifying figure of a person that was clearly experimented on wearing a Knights of Hanoi uniform, towering over at least twice Go's height. He wore one of their infamous mind control masks, but it did little to hide the scars all over his face and the milky white of his eyes, and the suit was clearly too tight on them, their muscles threatening to tear it at any sudden movement. Even Go would have issues taking this person on, so Yusaku just sighs in misplaced annoyance; he always runs into some of the weirdest shit by himself. Hanoi's man-made mutants aren't unusual, but they sure are something special.

To his relief, the mutant doesn't seem to have a very good eyesight and is not attacking civilians, but he's also not alone— Knights of Hanoi stand off to the side, watching the giant with no small amount of glee in their posture and the curl of their mouths. One of them is clearly the gang leader; they're holding the mind control remote in one hand, loosely, like they think nothing could ever happen to it.

Typical of Hanoi to be this laid back in a city filled with heroes. The giant mutant was probably not even one of their own; they loved to kidnap people and test their drugs and viruses on them. It's absolutely disgusting, and it makes Yusaku furious.

“Prepare yourself,” Yusaku warns Ai, stretching his arms over his head and looking around for any dark spots. This is why he hates working during the day. “We’re going for the minions, and then the big guy.”

“WHAT!?” Ai screams, so Yusaku shushes him despite it not making a difference because of the ambiance of the panicked crowd around them. The Knights haven’t even spotted him yet. Yusaku moves toward the sidewalk to step on the shadow of a building, but there’s way too much light around. He’s at a disadvantage, but it’s either this or let this poor mindless person wreck the whole city. “We’re going to die! I don’t like you anymore!”

"Get used to it," Yusaku says, and then falls through the shadow, sudden gravity pulling at him until he's landing cleanly, quietly, on another one right next to a distracted Hanoi lackey standing behind the others. He takes too long to notice him; Yusaku has him unconscious on the ground before the others even register what's happening and get out their shiny new guns, the same ones that blasted Yusaku through a wall not thirty minutes ago. He glares at them even as he talks to Ai. "You clearly have teeth, so don't be afraid to bite. This suit is half of my support equipment, so don't you dare mess with it."

"Did he say something about biting?" One of the Knights says, perplexed, so Yusaku jumps him first, too fast for him to avoid getting a kick in the chin and his gun slapped away from his hand. The other Knights take a step back because they have backwards instincts, but raise up their guns properly in warning as Yusaku holds the Knight he grabbed in a choke hold, staring them down with his signature frown. He's shorter than all of them, but it doesn't make a difference.

"Playmaker-sama, you're cruel," Ai whines, but Yusaku ignores him. The Knights start saying something about him talking to himself, but Ai effectively talks over them. "But you're also so cool! Your control over shadows is so neat! I get why humans go crazy for you now!"

Oh no, Yusaku thinks, glancing around at his confused, furious enemies, *Ai is a fan*. Yusaku hates fans. It's the last thing he should be concerned about though. There are three Knights standing before him telling him to let their fellow criminal down, but Yusaku is obviously not going to do that. He's barely using any of his strength as it is; this guy will pass out at most if he doesn't knock him out first.

"What did you do to him?" He asks, gesturing with his head at the hulking beast that's currently hitting a truck repeatedly. Despite having super strength, the mutant doesn't seem to have the invulnerability Go does, so he leaves drops of blood behind with every punch. It makes his stomach lurch. "That virus is new."

The Knight he saw with the mind control remote grins. "You like it? We made that one especially for your friend, Onizuka— shame he's not around

to see it."

Yusaku grinds his teeth so hard the Knight in his hold shivers. Good. "Is there a cure?"

"Maybe, I don't really care," the leader shrugs. Yusaku tightens his grip on the guy he's holding until he finally runs out of air and passes out, letting him fall to the ground in a heap. The mocking smile the Knight he's talking to wears makes his blood boil. "What? Does that make you *mad*?"

"Ai," Yusaku calls, knowing he's listening. The Knights laugh at him like he's crazy; it's an eerily familiar feeling, but only serves to cement his choice. There will be no more Hanoi victims today. "Help me out, please."

"As you wish, Playmaker-sama!"

The moment Ai starts leaking out of his suit Yusaku jumps at the Knight standing slightly to his left, taking advantage of the distraction of a monster with tentacles appearing seemingly out of nowhere. He manages to keep him at bay for a few seconds by raising his gun, but he's too distracted by what's going on behind Yusaku to aim properly; he gets to land a good punch that knocks a few of his teeth out and he falls to the ground with a loud '*crunch*', probably breaking something else. Instead of chatting, Yusaku just presses his foot against his throat hard and waits for him to pass out while making sure to dismantle the gun, keeping an ear on what's happening behind him.

When he turns around he expects Ai to still be fighting one of the other two Knights, but instead, he's greeted by the sight of him wrapping them up tightly in his tentacles, extending them out to him like an offering. It's quite the odd sight, and both Knights cringe at every slide of Ai against them. He's so glad Ai likes him now.

"These are lame," he says, the pair of sharp yellow eyes staring at him with vaguely unsettling joy. Yusaku's still processing he's an actual living thing and not a movie special effect. "Here, I don't even want to tongue them."

"Tongue us?" One of the Knights whispers, soundly deeply disturbed. Yusaku ignores him and goes right for the leader, running his hands over his body until he finds the remote—oh. The crushed remote.

Crap.

He tries not to get angry or disappointed about this, but it's hopeless. The mind control remote was important and his carelessness just resulted in it being destroyed. He should have attacked the leader first, but thinking about Hanoi forcing people into becoming lab rats messes with his brain. To get some of his anger out Yusaku punches the one Knight left conscious right on the nose, watching him slump over with satisfaction. Shit, he fucked up big time.

"We'll have to tear that mask off him," he says to Ai, sounding perhaps more dejected than he was aiming for. Ai makes a vaguely scandalized sound at him. "I should have told you to watch for the remote. It got smashed."

He holds it up for Ai to see, and he somehow pouts. "I'm sorry, Playmaker-sama—"

"It's my mistake," Yusaku turns around to see what the mutant is up to—ah, that fire hydrant is going to be a bitch to replace. He must be in pain, too; those weren't easy to tear off the ground. At least some of the fires were being doused. "Come on, the sooner we knock him out the sooner we can get the police force to take him to a hospital."

Ai jumps on his back and then melts into the suit again, giving Yusaku goosebumps—this was not going to be weird. There seem to be no civilians around anymore, which means he can go all out, but this field is still inadequate for him; this street is made up of apartment buildings on one side and a playground on another, and the sun was high in the sky, not many clouds around. Too much light and very little shadow. He needs back up, but that probably wouldn't be here for a while, considering his communications with Kusanagi-san seemed to have been cut off. The other heroes probably don't know about the attack spreading to this side of the city; according to his mental math and based off how many turns he took to

follow Ai, he was probably about six blocks away from the main event. Fuck.

“Ai,” Yusaku moves cautiously towards the sidewalk, where the shadows of the buildings don't fail him, trying not to bring attention to himself. It seems that this mutant attacks only on command, not paying attention to moving targets unless he's told to, but he has no idea if that will change now that there's no mind control remote around. He needs a plan to get around that, preferably without wrecking the place any further. “I'm going to move so I can land on top of the big guy.”

“What!? That thing could kill us!” Yusaku looks down to see Ai cowering on his wrist, hiding his face behind his hands. It's just as odd as everything that has happened today. “Please, Playmaker-sama, I don't want to die just after an hour of being born!”

“The key word is ‘*could*’. We're going to avoid that today,” Yusaku crouches down onto the ground, pressing his hands against it and hiding completely under the shadows, calculating from exactly what height he has to drop himself from. The hardest part is going to be creating the shadow he needs on top of him to be able to actually move, since he's in the sunniest part of the street - just his luck - but he has *just* enough to work with. Ai makes a distressed sound. “Alright, brace yourself. I'm going to trust you to hold him down as much as you can so I can tear it off. I'll try to be quick.”

And with that, Yusaku lets the shadows surround him, his mind and powers straining a bit to locate exactly where he's going. The ground disappears from under his feet and the darkness takes over his vision for a second before he's falling, faster than he expected, and landing a bit clumsily on the mutant's shoulders, barely keeping himself from dropping right to the ground by wrapping his legs around their neck and holding onto their clothes. Ai screams as he dangles backwards from his shoulders, gravity threatening to make him fall head first into the ground, but Yusaku keeps his cool and holds on tighter with his legs before lifting his upper body, his chest colliding with the back of the giant's head and making him grunt. He'll probably bruise there.

The mutant screams. Ai, a bit panicked, is quick to do as he was told and get partly off him to hold the giant in place, tentacles locking his arms and body in a tight hold that looks barely strong enough to keep him still for more than a few seconds. Despite this, the giant barely notices the tentacles and Yusaku clinging to him like a koala trying to tear off the Hanoi mask by bringing his hands to his face, instead just attempting to move forwards and struggling with the force of Ai's grip, shaking his whole body around. Yusaku stumbles with the force of it, almost falling off again, but the frenzy of it allows him to sink his nails into his face right under the mask and pull with all his strength, the offensive accessory tearing itself off his face with a horrible sound of skin ripping and a terrible scream of pain that shakes Yusaku to his core.

This is why he hates fucking up Hanoi's mind control remotes. The victims always end up scarred, but most of them are thankful for it as long as they get to be free. But not all get better afterwards, or recover their sanity for that matter. He hopes it's not too much to ask that this won't be the case for this big guy.

The giant stills, all the fight draining out of him, and Yusaku sighs, exhaustion slumping his shoulders despite his attempts to stay alert. Ai slowly untangles himself from the giant, going back to looking like a sticky kid toy on his wrist as glancing around nervously as Yusaku smashes the mask into the ground. "Is it over now?"

"Apparently—" Yusaku starts, only to get interrupted by one of his legs being grabbed in a death grip that cuts off his words, panic immediately taking over as he realizes what's about to happen. Ai screaming a warning that's unfortunately too late.

He's suddenly being tossed like a ragdoll across the street, landing painfully against the side of a car and probably breaking something, judging with the '*crunch!*' he hears. The air is pulled from his lungs and he can't help but gasp and wheeze, barely keeping a scream down from the pain, closing his eyes tightly. He hates Hanoi *so fucking much* right now. Ai tries to get his attention, sounding alarmed, but he isn't listening— in front of him, the giant goes mad.

Before, his movements were reckless but had a clear objective in mind. Now, because Yusaku did a stupid thing, it was just wrecking everything in sight. Fuck. Well. He probably wouldn't die from this, but he didn't fancy being used as a toy by a giant that was experimented on by whatever crazy scientists Hanoi was supporting this month. Getting up feels impossible, and his attempt is another mistake. Apparently, the mutant was very sensitive to movement, because he turns towards him like a hound would at the scent of meat. Yusaku has a second of blind panic before the guy runs towards him and he barely has enough time to weakly throw himself to the side before he collides with the car, right where he was standing just a moment ago, shaking his head like he barely felt a thing.

"I don't think that worked," Ai points out, very unhelpfully. Yusaku manages to stand up and runs backwards, stepping over an unconscious Knight of Hanoi. He doesn't feel one bit of remorse for the lackey, since he's far more worried about playing tag with a killing machine.

Yusaku decides that answering Ai's statement is not worth it, never mind he can barely breathe well enough to talk, instead moving out of the sight of the mutant and crouching behind a nearby car that's certainly not safe enough, his hand hovering over the pain in his ribs as he coughs up some blood onto the concrete. He brings his other hand up to tap his earpiece and sighs when he finds it in pieces. It must have taken some damage when he was thrown through that building earlier in the day, but now it was completely shattered. Shit.

"What are we going to do now?" Ai whispers, looking up at him with nervous eyes. Peeking his head around the corner of the car and ignoring the pain as much as he can, Yusaku sees the giant picking up one of the Knights Ai took out and shaking them, throwing them away when he receives no feedback. Ouch.

It seems that he's behaving a bit like a wild animal, looking around with narrowed eyes and a slumped over back, but Yusaku can see the trauma induced fury behind his eyes, proven by how he suddenly turns and screams at a trash can, kicking it over and smashing it with his fists. Whatever Hanoi did to him was not pretty; there's an underlying note of pain to his screams, and it made Yusaku slightly hesitant to actually try to take out this

guy, not to mention he can barely move. He's healing, but it's too slow, just enough to keep him alive—and yet, he can't let him just go wild.

If he wants to live to see the next day through and pry every nugget of knowledge out of Ai, he has to get out of this situation. There's not that much he can do without moving the fight elsewhere, but he's not looking to make things worse or make chaos theory run its greedy fingers through the situation. Neutralizing this massive beast will not be easy to accomplish by himself, and the only way to do that is probably by finding a weak spot. The mind control mask proved futile and Yusaku doesn't have Go's strength to handle it hand to hand, and the light makes it hard for him to move around

Yusaku tries to stand up to move somewhere a bit more covered, trips on a soda can, creating a loud noise that echoes across the street, and the giant immediately turns towards him and *charges*.

He knows he has no time to get out of the way. He can barely walk and Ai is too slow and too panicked to pull him out of harm's way without him asking for it, which is something he also has no time to do. He's almost thinking faster than things are happening, adrenaline pumping him up and yet he's not able to use it because of his wounds. He will not die from this, but he'll certainly land in a hospital by the end of the day. Shit. Ok. He still needs to at least try to move, so he drags himself away with his arms as the mutant approaches him, gearing up to shorten the distance by jumping. He will land right on top of his legs or his feet, and it will be painful, but as long as he doesn't get his hands on Ai or hit any vital organs it'll be alright

Yusaku is so focused on imminent death he doesn't notice someone else running towards him from behind until he's being grabbed by the back of his suit and pulled away, strong arms wrapping around him easily and his vision going a bit fuzzy, ears ringing at what he thinks is the sound of a gun going off and his hurried breakfast from this morning threatens to make a come back. There's wind whipping against his ears and the heat of whoever just saved him's body against him. He thinks he passes out for a moment, but hears the mutant screaming and more gunshots ring out until he has a

vague idea of what's going on when his brain stops melting for long enough for him to think properly.

Opening his eyes confirms his suspicions.

The sight of Revolver's back covered by his usual black trenchcoat, muscles pulling at the fabric and redlining blinging out every edge, is as relievingly familiar as it is annoying. He looks a bit like a demon right out of hell, with his hood pulled up and his posture as confident as it is tense; the movement of his hands and arms as he aims and shoots is hypnotizing, and Yusaku isn't sure how to feel about that. On one hand, he's really glad he isn't dead. On the other, he doesn't want to deal with him right now. Especially considering he has a sniper rifle over his shoulder. Like he needed something like that to get the job done.

He's laying on a pool of his own misery, at least figuratively; he's sideways on the concrete more than ten feet away from the car he got thrown against and right next to the playground swing set. There are weird spots dancing in his vision he has to blink out and for a few alarming seconds, he can't feel his toes. Revolver stands over him almost protectively; it's a sight he's way too used to. It isn't any easier to swallow right now, despite how grateful he is, that Revolver is this synched with him being in danger to appear at the right time.

A bullet hits the mutant, making him scream in fury and pain even as his steps slow down, so Yusaku decides five seconds of rest are enough for him. He sits up, the world swimming for a second, but Revolver turns his head around the second he does, still aiming at the mutant, perfectly attuned to him in a way that should be worrying but only makes Yusaku feel funny, and not in an '*I almost died way*'. Not good.

"Playmaker," Revolver says, his mouth forming a grin as the creepy, yellow eyes of his mask stare at him unfeelingly, like they always have. The sniper rifle on his shoulder looks very casual on him, somehow; it compliments his coat swaying with the breeze and the tightness of his pants. Behind him, the mutant falls to the ground with a large '*thump*' that rattles Yusaku to the bone. At least that's dealt with. "Are we even yet? I believe this is the third time in a row I've swooped in to save your skin."

His head is pounding, his ribs hurt, his back is probably covered in bruises, he most certainly broke something and the sight of Revolver looking so smug and so fucking good with a sniper rifle is infuriating, and doesn't help his case at all. He gets up with trembling legs, and Revolver steps over to help him fast, dropping the rifle on the ground, hands holding him tightly by the forearms and keeping him straight. Fuck, he's in *pain*, and it makes him unconsciously lean into the touch.

"Did you use blanks?" Are the first words out of his mouth, and Revolver's smirk does not falter, even though Yusau's voice comes out a bit raw. He can practically see the '*of course I did you silly hero*' expression through the mask, never mind he's never seen his actual face. He just has that air about him. Moving on to another question, then: "Is there a cure?"

"I'm working on it," Revolver shrugs, and Yusaku almost falls to the ground again with how quickly he slumps over in relief. Probably would have if not for the hands holding him up. Next time he isn't jumping on giant's backs, no sir. "You should probably get some rest, I'll handle him —"

What he does next is questionable, but Yusaku is pretty sure he has a concussion, so he might as well just roll with it. Going on his tiptoes, he drops a chaste kiss on Revolver's mouth, swaying a bit on his feet with the sudden change in height, but he's too weak for anything else. Revolver, the closet gentleman that he is, just keeps him upwards and shakes his head, his voice amused.

"I don't think I'm comfortable leaving you alone—"

Something goes wrong. Yusaku feels the sudden shift in the air, in how Revolver grows tense and his grip on him becomes borderline painful. It makes him raise his head to glance at the mutant over his shoulder, but he's still unconscious on the ground, and when he turns around there's nothing to look at but the remnants of the Hanoi attack. Thinking that Revolver is seeing something he can't, Yusaku looks up at him to find his mouth curling into a displeased, stiff line, like he's holding back some crude, bitter words.

It makes him want to take a cautious step back, because Revolver is not usually like this unless they're dealing with Hanoi lackeys or having a heated argument about subjects they usually don't touch, but to his surprise the second he even tries to get away Revolver's grip tightens, nails digging into his skin through the gloves and the fabric of his bodysuit, bringing him even closer than he was before.

"Playmaker," Revolver starts, his voice a poem of contained fury. His usually smug, playful self is gone, replaced with this sudden, cold burning anger. Yusaku is terribly confused and worried, because this isn't like him at all. Just *what* in the hell—"I want you to be honest with me. Where did you get that *thing*?"

Revolver says the word '*thing*' with so much venom in his voice Yusaku nearly flinches, and for a second he's confused about what he means, but then he remembers.

Ai. The alien he found about an hour ago on a sewer. That claimed he was born the day of the incident. The same incident Revolver knows a lot of information about, but refuses to share.

Yusaku glances down at Ai looking up at them in confusion, pointing at himself like he can't believe he's being called a thing, and Yusaku steels himself for what's coming. The one problem he always has with Revolver, the one thing keeping him from ever crossing several lines: their past. Their connection probably runs deeper than blood, and yet they can never find a middle ground when it comes to the subject of the incident. Those discussions normally end on someone getting punched or Yusaku walking out on him and ignoring him for a month straight until Revolver is forced to crawl back from whatever hole he hides himself in and apologize for being an uncooperative ass, just like he did two weeks ago.

Yusaku would say he doesn't know why he always accepts his apologies, but that would be a lie. He believes in whatever cause Revolver is pursuing because it's similar enough to his own: to take down Hanoi for good, get rid of their bioweapons and viruses and shut down their illegal labs. Stop the disappearances and kidnappings. Bring the number of victims down to zero forever. He wants to help Revolver because there's much more to him than

what meets the eye; he's known him for five years now—if there was only an empty shell, Yusaku wouldn't ever look at him twice.

He also thinks there's the possibility for something more there, but it's a subject he avoids. What's important is that Revolver never lets him help, and has put up more walls than the City Hall has rebuilt after a villain attack, all with the prerogative of dealing with it all by himself, like the petty, stubborn dumbass he is.

Yusaku is also a petty, stubborn dumbass though, which is why he clenches his jaw and narrows his eyes at him in a suspicious glare.

He's not bending to Revolver's *judiciousness*, and he very well knows it—despite not being able to see it, he knows his expression under that mask must match his own poisonous look. He wouldn't expect anything less from the man that has so effectively broken every rule in his book about how to interact with other people on the job.

This was bound to be a fun conversation.

Notes for the Chapter:

yusaku: [finds an alien] sick

3. trepidation

Notes for the Chapter:

good luck y'all... it's been a while XD

i hope you enjoy and thanks to Celepom for putting up with my babbles. too many wips.

The silence that grows between them is not awkward. They are far too used to being quiet in each other's space in a way that's both comfortable and fulfilling, easier than exchanging words at times, for it to be completely unpleasant or unfamiliar, but this time the tension between them is so thick and full of suspicion that Yusaku feels nothing but ready to tail it out of there. He doesn't like it when Revolver talks down to him like that, like he has the higher ground and Yusaku is just a little fool running around in spandex-like fabric almost getting killed in a daily basis.

It's not like is his choice to lack answers and knowledge. If Revolver didn't refuse to give him some straightforward information instead of little hints and riddles for him to look into and solve, Yusaku would have probably already gotten the answer to most if not all of his questions, the ones he's had for years, the ones that are the reason why he's even standing right in front of him right now. Whatever Revolver thinks he's doing by keeping things from him will never work out in his favor; this little staring competition they're having right now pretty much proves that.

Yusaku will not yield and he *knows* that, far too aware that Yusaku will always win a silent staring contest, which is why he's the one that sighs, clenches his jaw, and muses over his words before speaking. He does not let go of him, which is smart; Yusaku would have punched him the second he did.

"Playmaker," Revolver starts, trying to keep his voice even by taking a deep calming breath, but there's a bit of restlessness to his tone Yusaku isn't very familiar with but serves to keep him on edge, his jaw clenching. His headache is slowly receding, allowing him to think more clearly, and he decides he doesn't like what he's seeing. He isn't going to prioritize

Revolver's secrets over what he's been looking for during the last five years, though. He has not done so in the past, so he was not going to start now. "You don't know what you're dealing with right now. You shouldn't have found it—"

"But I did," Yusaku interrupts, his tone harsh and cutting beyond what he expected, but it's the only way Revolver will get off his back, if at least for a second. The clicking of his teeth together as a result is satisfactory, even though he dislikes the fact that they're even acting like this. It could never be simple for once. "He was in the sewers, and I found him. Now he's going to give me the answers you have *refused* to tell me ever since we met —"

"*He?* It's an *alien*, Playmaker, and a dangerous one at that, you shouldn't get attached—"

The sudden alarm and insistence coming from Revolver is surprising and worrying; Yusaku is no fool, he's well aware that aliens are mostly unexplored territory for him and he shouldn't trust Ai, since it could land him into issues he would have no idea how to deal with, issues that could lead to his death if he's reckless enough. But he also has a gut feeling about this, like he's suddenly reached a turning point in his investigation. If Ai knows *anything* at all that he already doesn't – and that's *obviously* the case – he can't let him go. He'll keep Ai, as a hostage or as an ally. Only time and questioning would tell which he'll turn out to be, and he knows it's better to hope for him to be useful than to trust in Revolver's judgment when it comes to Hanoi, so he will not be handing over his one window of opportunity just like that.

Before he can open his mouth to tell him off though, Ai is stretching his torso so he can be eye-level with them, flapping his arms around to get them to look at him instead of at each other. Revolver glares, somehow managing to convey the look through the mask, and Yusaku pulls on his arms to test the give and try to take a step back, to no avail. Revolver was rock solid, the amount of controlled, tightly restrained strength under his skin making itself relevant; Yusaku knows without question that shit is going to go down if he wants to get out of this one. He would never expect anything less.

“First off, *mister*,” Ai says, puffing out his chest. Revolver growls at him and he immediately deflates, all his confidence drained out of him. But to his credit, he keeps going, frowning up at Revolver with a hint of confusion and annoyance. “I may be an alien but I do have a right to a name since my language is too complicated for human tongues and I thought having my mom’s gender would be nice—”

“Your *mom*?” Revolver repeats, completely baffled, and turns towards Yusaku like he wants an explanation. He just shrugs and shakes his head, silently thinking about how to get out of his iron grip. Ai continues without a hiccup.

“—so I would appreciate it if you respected that and kindly backed off. I know we’re *sort of* a thing too but Playmaker-sama here got to me first and —”

Yusaku takes his chance to, perhaps a bit recklessly, grab tightly onto Revolver’s sleeves and bring his right foot up to wrap it around his knee, pushing with the sole until he loses his balance and starts tipping backward. Revolver isn’t expecting it and Yusaku only succeeds thanks to Ai serving as a wonderful, bizarre distraction; he loosened up his grip in his attempt to remain upright, so he struggles to tighten it back up as Yusaku attempts to step away from him, pulling at his arms to get them free. He fails at breaking away from him cleanly, a grunt escaping his lips, and instead falls to the ground, free from his grasp and hitting his shoulder against a random piece of leftover rubble from the battle that somehow made its way over to the playground, but he barely feels the pain over the rush of adrenaline.

Dizziness coming back full force and keeping him from standing up immediately, Yusaku crawls away from Revolver and kneels, his previous wound making themselves known by throbbing at the hassle of their tug war. It gives Revolver just enough time to gather his bearings, but he manages to stand up just in time for him to approach him, his shoulders so tense that Yusaku knows he’s angry, but there’s no fear inside him—he’s faced worse, in his own humble opinion.

As soon as Revolver is within arm’s reach, Yusaku punches him on the jaw. It barely does anything to him, because Revolver is an immovable object

when he wants to be, but it does serve to stunt him slightly, giving him enough time to run pass him towards the shadows of the apartment building. He's not even completely out of the playground before he's being tackled to the ground by him though, and being saved from getting a mouthful of dirt by Revolver kneeling instead of pushing him down against the ground, arms wrapped firmly around him, his chest pressed against his back and their hips not having an inch of breathing space. Yusaku wheezes in pain and tries to break out, but it's as hopeless as it was when they were still standing.

"Is this how humans mate—" Ai begins, only to be aggressively shushed by both of them. It would be almost nice to be this close to Revolver if Yusaku weren't struggling to get out of the hold, but Revolver's arms are wrapped tight against his bruised ribs and the pain has him coughing out all the air in his lungs, drops of blood escaping his lips and causing him to sink his nails into his arms and *pull* in an attempt to reduce the pain. It doesn't work.

"Am I hurting you?" Revolver asks against his ear, warm breath caressing his skin, and a shiver runs down his spine. This is really *not* the time.
"Playmaker—"

"Let me *go*," Yusaku chokes out, and then jams an elbow into Revolver's stomach with all his strength. He was clearly not prepared for it, too caught up in his worry, because his grip loosens and Yusaku is able to crawl again, this time further away before he kneels and stares over his shoulder at Revolver walking towards him again. His ribs throb, so he takes some deep breaths to calm down, but it's extremely painful and only results on him coughing up more blood. He slightly ashamed of how weak he's being right now; usually he's able to go toe to toe with Revolver without much issue other than the fact that he's a hard nut to crack, but apparently being tossed against a car did have its consequences.

Still, he stands up and faces him, ignoring the fact that he looks like he's holding back questions, like he's actually regretful about aggravating his wounds and hurting him further. Yusaku spits blood at his feet, glaring at how he shakes his head almost like he's dealing with a particularly stubborn kid. Yusaku is, in fact, not sorry about hurting *him*. "I'm not giving you Ai."

Revolver seems confused for a few seconds, going as far as to stop walking, his mouth twitching as he realizes who he's referring to. "Is that a pun? You named an alien after a *pun*?"

"*Hey, it has a nice ring to it!*" Ai shrieks, but Yusaku's own answer is to turn around and run, jumping over a slide and almost tripping, failing the landing but not stopping for even a second, ignoring his stumbling feet. Moments like this he's glad he's faster than Revolver and not stronger; he would have already caught him otherwise, since the pain in his limbs and ribs keeps him from giving his one-hundred percent. Damn, the leg that mutant grabbed was *not* in as good of a condition as he believed.

Still, if Revolver is anything he's skilled, just as much as Yusaku is at that if not more, which is why he turns around mid-step, takes his resulting slight hesitation as a chance, and grabs the front of his shirt and coat along with wrist, spinning around on his heel as he does, to throw him over his shoulder.

Once he's on the ground, Yusaku doesn't hesitate to sit on top of him, his knee digging into the center of his back with as much strength as he has and one of his hands grabbing his left arm to twist it as far as it would go without dislocating, his other hand coming up to hold his head down against the ground. He receives a grunt for his trouble, as well as a deep breathless chuckle that manages to make him angry, because there's nothing amusing about this, so he presses in harder in reiteration. Revolver spits out some dirt.

"I could get out of this one if I wanted to," he says, wheezing a bit. Yusaku feels slightly dizzy again, from all the running and squirming and flipping he's done in the last few minutes, but his grip does not relent. Revolver probably could free himself easily, but he wouldn't, not yet; Yusaku was confident on that at least. "Playmaker, we can reason with each other without having to—"

"I don't trust you with this," Yusaku interrupts, and his honesty effectively makes him shut his mouth. Trust—they never really talk about it in regards to each other. Perhaps it was time to change that. "I would trust you with

many things, Revolver, and I have since we met, but not this time, not with Ai.”

“You never listen to me when I tell you you’re better off not getting involved,” is his answer, and Yusaku can practically taste the bitterness of regret in his voice, making him swallow. “I could make it easier for you, take it off your hands—”

Alarm burst inside his chest, the uncanny sixth sense he has for when Revolver is making proposals like this making an appearance. “What do you want him for? What do you *know*? ”

“You know I can’t give away that information just because you’re asking,” At that, Yusaku twists his arm even further. Revolver barely sighs. “It’s for your own good—”

“Bullshit,” Yusaku snarls, and it sounds aggressive to his own ears, his temper getting the best of him. It’s always like this when Revolver acts like an uncooperative asshole; Yusaku forgets about keeping any semblance of calm and just demands the answers he’s craving, because it frustrates him to no end. Five years— it’s been *five years* of dancing around the subject, and Yusaku is tired of playing the waiting game. “I don’t care about my own good, I care about getting answers and taking the people behind the Hanoi Project to justice. If you aren’t willing to help, then *get out of my way*. I’m not letting you have the last word on this, not again, not after last month.”

Revolver stays quiet. For a second, Yusaku thinks he’s about to be attacked and wrestled into the ground as a result of his mention of the argument they had not that long ago, that ended in shouting and harsh words, so he tightens his grip in preparation. To his surprise though, Revolver just sighs again and shakes his head as much as he can with it buried into the ground. Ai peeks out from his shoulder and stares.

“I don’t want to fight you on this, Playmaker,” he starts his tone carefully measured and kind, velvety soft almost, and Yusaku scoffs. Fucking typical. “I will not allow you to become another one of my targets. If you just gave me the Ignis—”

Noticing his slip up, Revolver clicks his mouth shut, but it's too late. Yusaku leans forwards, knee digging in deeper, and he ignores the pain it brings him to move his middle even if it's just an inch, the flare of a warning going through his leg that he's pushing himself a bit too much. "What's an Ignis?"

"Speak up, it's nothing I don't know anyways!" Ai insists, finger gunning at him, but Revolver only clenches his jaw. Yusaku knows he's getting nothing more out of him right now because he's better at keeping secrets than anything else Yusaku's seen him do over the years, but he now has to decide what to do with him. He can't just let him go— Revolver knows Playmaker isn't going to stop looking into this just because he said so, and as much as he can tell that he means it when he says he doesn't want to be his enemy, Yusaku knows better than to get carried away by everything that's between them. If Revolver doesn't want him to work against him, he should have put down those walls he has around him years ago and let him in.

He didn't want to like him when they met— when he first showed up, Revolver was a right fucking asshole, getting his nose into his business and saying just the right things to make him boil in anger. He's still like that, only somehow worse because he has more ways to rile him up and drive him crazy he was not expecting, but something about him when it comes to Playmaker softens, even if it's just a little bit.

He wishes it wasn't mutual.

"You know me, Revolver," Yusaku says, and tries to keep his words as simple and honest as he can. Ai is almost inappropriately intrigued with this conversation, if the wiggling of what Yusaku thinks is the space his eyebrows would be at is any indication. "I can't stand to the side with crossed arms while you keep important things I deserve to know from me. You've known this since day one. If we have to be enemies so I can fulfill my mission, then so be it."

A few seconds of silence pass. When Revolver answers, he sounds both tired and disappointed. Yusaku can understand why. "So be it, then. I'll leave you alone for today. It wouldn't be fair to attack you when you can barely walk."

Yusaku scoffs again, at the emphasis he makes about his less than ideal condition, slightly insulted by the assumption he wouldn't be able to defend himself, but decides to trust his words. He lets go of his arms and rearranges himself so he's straddling him instead of digging his knee into him, too tired to move away, but Revolver takes it one step further by rolling underneath him so they're facing each other, trying his hardest to not disturb his position. He ends up sitting on his lap while Revolver sighs in relief at being able to stretch out his arms, a hand coming up to wipe away a spot of dirt in his face as he sits up. The mask is scratched, and it makes him feel a twisted sort of pride that it is.

"You got me good," he says, and Yusaku leans away from him, letting exhaustion wash over him. His shoulders drop and he grunts at the pain blossoming from his ribs, his leg, his back—he feels like a huge bruise right now, but Revolver's comment makes him snort. He shouldn't allow himself to be this cozy with him, really—it will make nothing but complicate things, but he's weak to the comfort of a familiar presence, at being able to relax without having to watch his back.

"I would have actually made some damage if I wasn't half dead when you got here," Yusaku brings a hand to his lips, feels the wetness of blood like there's no fabric in between it and his fingertips and swallows, running his tongue over his mouth to try and clean himself. Revolver watches in silence. "I'm disappointed on myself, but you're hard to take down. Always have been."

"You're not one to pull punches, when it comes to me. I may have felt something," Revolver sounds carefully amused, like he doesn't want to antagonize Yusaku any further, and it makes him roll his eyes when he brings a hand up to tap his jaw, right where Yusaku hit him. "Really, I may even have a bruise later—"

"I don't understand," Ai interrupts, making Yusaku straighten up his back at suddenly remembering he has things to do and an alien inhabiting his outfit. Ugh. He couldn't catch a break. "You two were just fighting and now you're talking like you're best buds! What are you!?"

Yusaku frowns. "It's complicated, and none of your business."

“Ah, c’mon I have a right to know—”

“You *really* don’t,” Revolver brings a hand up and points at Ai, finger dangerously close to touching the top of his head. Ai cowers away, setting his hands in Yusaku’s face like he’s trying to hug him. It’s kind of nice if he ignores the stickiness. “I suggest you keep your guard up, Ignis. You may have some knowledge, but you’ve been in a cocoon for more than ten years. I know more than you do.”

“So am I not allowed to point out *that thing*—?”

Revolver makes a warming sound and Ai quietens down immediately. He shakes his head at the exchange, confused and curious about what the hell they’re both keeping from him, and decides it’s time to make his way back home and look for Soulburner, maybe take a look at Go and Blue Angel’s status. He moves to stand up, but Revolver grabs his wrist and pulls him back in, no words spoken. Yusaku should be ashamed of how easily he goes, leaning into his space until their faces are so close he can feel his breath on his lips and smell the remaining gunpowder from the sniper rifle. It’s not a nice scent, but it sure is familiar, and tricks him into relaxing again.

“A good luck kiss for later?” Revolver asks, uncharacteristically hesitant when he brings a hand up to trace his lips with glove-covered fingers, fabric coming off stained with his blood. Yusaku, despite wishing he didn’t want it as bad as he does, leans into the touch. Ai makes a choked off, scandalized sound, but he doesn’t care about what he thinks is happening. “Call it a lucky charm for our imminent battle.”

Yusaku snorts, because the idea of Revolver asking for luck for when they face each other again is absolutely ridiculous but somewhat justified; the few times they had seriously fought each other hadn’t ended well, mostly in ties or non-results. Putting that aside though, Yusaku grabs the fabric of his black turtleneck, tugging at the zipper playfully to pull him even closer, his nose bumping the mask, and not for the first time he has the need to just tear it off him once and for all. But he won’t. One day, maybe, but not today.

“You’re awful at excuses,” Yusaku mumbles, ignoring his distracting thoughts of a tomorrow, lips sliding slightly against his, but leans away when Revolver tries to catch his mouth, pushing him back about half an inch. “Don’t ever lie to me about your intentions.”

His answer sounds like a promise. “I never do.”

Yusaku’s heart does few cartwheels across his chest when Revolver leans in and presses his lips against his, immediately opening his mouth and sighing when his tongue runs over his parted lips, a by now familiar feeling swelling in his chest. Hands come up to rest at his waist, softly pulling him closer until he can’t help but let out the moan he’s been trying to swallow, his own hands coming up to get his hands into the short, dark as night strands, ignoring the pain that blossoms in his chest and swallowing back an annoyed groan as his suit responds to his subconscious.

Every time he gets a bit frisky with Revolver the suit immediately makes it so that he feels every touch like he’s butt naked, even though factually, physically, he’s most definitively not. This results in him shivering at the slightest shift of Revolver’s hands against his body, which is dangerous. *Just* as dangerous, in fact, as the teeth pulling at his lips and the kisses that Revolver starts to trail down his neck over the suit. He is well aware he can’t fall into a full-on make-out session in the middle of a playground that was right next to a wrecked street so early on in the day, with alien life attached to him and probably having to watch it all, but it’s hard to pull away from the wetness and warm and exigency of Revolver’s mouth; he’s absolutely hopeless in the face of their mutual desire.

Thankfully, he gets his second – third, if Ai counts – savior of the day.

He hears the sound of something approaching fast, hears the landing of feet on the ground and instinctually feels a familiar presence around the area, only a few feet away. Soulburner has a penchant for being loud every time he stumbles upon Playmaker and Revolver going at it, with reason. No one wants to see their best friend necking a vigilante/anti-hero/plain criminal that sometimes saves people, which is why he always tries to give them a head up, to save his own skin. That Yusaku has had very in-depth drunken one-sided conversations with him about what exactly he wants Revolver to

do to him probably guarantee that Soulburner wants to leave them as alone as possible for sake of his own sanity, as proven by the events of last April's Fool, but he also takes pity on Yusaku's dignity, which is why he's not afraid to approach them when he arrives at the scene.

"Playmaker!" He calls, and successfully bursts the bubble of pure, unadulterated lust he was locked in. Revolver actually growls at the interruption, but Yusaku just pushes his face away as quickly as he can and stands up, more than ready to pretend he isn't embarrassed about his lack of self-control. Soulburner approaches with glowing fists of fire and his scarf billowing in the wind, his face stuck between a grin and a look of disgust. It looks a bit maniacal in his usually kind face. "I see you are busy!"

Soulburner is always so helpful, a blessing in a way, a true friend. His feedback is as important as Kusanagi-san's, probably more, and he never lets him down when he needs him—unless he's about to do a reckless thing that could get him killed; Takeru has an amazing sixth sense to always be on the other side of town when he needs backup, as he did earlier with the big mutant. That doesn't keep him from poking fun at him every time he's around Revolver. He's *surrounded* by people who just love to snicker at his far too complicated business with him.

"Well, you were late. Again," Yusaku shrugs, watching his shoulders drop and his grin turn into a pout. Revolver smirks, quietly satisfied, so Yusaku elbows him. He accepts no bullshit related to Soulburner, and he well knows it. "I take it you brought the police with you?"

"I called them over, yeah. People coming from this area were a bit panicked, said you were going to get yourself killed." Clearly having no fear for his life, Soulburner steps closer and throws an arm around his shoulders, looking him over with a critical eye to evaluate his well-being. Yusaku accepts it without so much as wincing, while Revolver stares like he wants to say a few words about it. Soulburner remains oblivious. "I'm glad to see you're in one piece, though! Sorry about being late."

Soulburner throws him a sheepish grin that makes Yusaku roll his eyes in amusement, suddenly feeling tired once again. "Did you manage to deal with the fallout from Go's front?"

“No issue there,” Soulburner nods, gives him another once over, and then turns towards Revolver, who seems to be seething a bit where he stands. As casually as he can, which is not at all for Yusaku’s eyes, Revolver pulls out a handgun from inside his coat and checks the load. Apparently lacking bullets, he pulls some out of his utility belt and puts them in. Soulburner doesn’t register this as a threat, mostly because he knows Yusaku wouldn’t let Revolver do a stupid thing. “So, what are you up to? I haven’t seen your ugly mug around in a while!”

Soulburner says it in a friendly manner, but it makes little difference for Revolver, who just smirks and fingers the bullets on his hand like he wants to put them to use. Yusaku very nearly rolls his eyes, and decides to check whether Ai is peeking out of his suit or not. He doesn’t see him, so he assumes he’s hiding.

“Oh, you know, terrorizing children and shooting things,” Revolver answers, his voice so cheery it’s obviously fake, and Soulburner openly grins at it. “I see you’re still an awful sidekick—”

“Excuse you, the only sidekick here is your Spectre buddy, who actually owes me a bet—”

“Alright, we’re done here,” Yusaku steps in between them just as Revolver opens his mouth and lightly pulls Soulburner’s arm to guide them towards a nicely sided shadow, not hiding how he has to lean on him to walk without limping. It’s better to cut the conversation here now, because the subject of the bet is brought up. “C’mon, it’s already getting late for me—”

“Aw, but I genuinely missed his snarky snark—”

“Too bad for you, then—”

“Playmaker,” Revolver calls, and Yusaku turns to him without thinking about it twice. They both almost trip because of it, and Soulburner holds him tightly by the arm just in case Yusaku suddenly collapses, which he’s thankful for. “Tomorrow, things will be different.”

Yusaku stares at the harsh line of his mouth and licks his lips, noticing that there's a hint on his own blood on Revolver's. The sight is almost poetic, if only because he knows that whatever happens next will determine what they'll become for good. They're at the hands of fate now, not that Yusaku would ever deny that all that has lead him here has been anything but destiny.

From the distance, he hears the police sirens coming their way, so he knows the three of them should make themselves sparse. Still, he stands for a few more seconds and then turns around, away from the soulless mask that will never manage to convey any expression at all, away from the feeling of pertinence that Revolver's words bring him, a frown pulling at his lips as he walks away.

"Try to keep up," he replies, and Soulburner is clever enough not to question him yet, instead just staring in mild confusion. Ai has been quiet, having retreated back to the suit to hide from Yusaku's carnal impulses, most likely. He's not looking forward to explain him to Takeru. "I'm already two steps ahead."

"And three backward."

Yusaku ignores the unease the words cause him and walks away without looking back.

When Yusaku arrives with Takeru at the building that houses his shared apartment with Kusanagi-san and Jin, the hotdog truck is parked outside. They already changed in the public bathroom Yusaku jumped a few shadows into to get them there, and Takeru was slightly dizzy from it – everyone but Yusaku always got nauseous when he shadow traveled somewhere, unfortunately – but they both make a beeline for the truck despite being tired and needing a shower. Yusaku especially was beginning to feel the grime from walking in a sewer, and his wounds didn't make it

better. He just hopes there's no internal bleeding his healing factor is not taking care of in favor of his ribs.

He hates having a selective healing factor, but it was better than no healing at all. He really needs some pain killers; feeling your ribs straighten back up from the broken mess they almost became isn't fun by any means.

On the way back, Ai decided to break his vow of silence and introduce himself to Takeru while they changed in the bathroom, who screamed bloody murder and claimed he was an evil monster before he realized monsters wouldn't call Yusaku mom and don't typically try to become friends with people. After the initial shock though, he took it really well:

"Well, he's cute! And funny, that's all I could ask for," he said, while he petted Ai's head. He was really pleased with this, and looked at Yusaku as if he was trying to make him feel guilty about not hugging the shit out of him. It didn't work.

Ai was incredibly flattered, but Yusaku cut them off before they inevitably got along *too* much. Yusaku felt some kinship towards Ai, sure, but he stills knows next to nothing about him—he's not going to completely trust him just because he's been unknowingly developing and learning from his consciousness for the last sixteen years. That, in fact, only makes him even more suspicious of him, but talking this out with Kusanagi-san and Takeru would help him work out what to do with him, cuteness notwithstanding.

Yusaku's ribs are still throbbing when Kusanagi-san opens the back doors of the truck and allows them to climb in, bringing out one extra chair from the supply closet and gesturing for them to get comfortable. He checked in the bathroom how bad the damage was and found ugly bruising all across his chest and back, as well as on the leg the mutant grabbed. He's pretty sure that if he wasn't technically a half-alien he would be dead or at the very least really close to it. His healing picked up shortly after they left Revolver behind, which means that he no longer feels like every breath is a chore, but he knows he's really lucky his lungs weren't punctured. That wouldn't have been hard to walk off.

“You guys look awful,” are the first words out of Kusanagi-san’s mouth, and Yusaku agrees. He feels like shit. Takeru is in a far better state than he is, but seems like he’s on his way to falling into a sleep coma, as he sits on the closest chair and leans back with closed eyes. Because he lost communication, he has no real knowledge of what he was doing during the attack, but he was confident it involved some crowd control and hitting people in the face. They could both use a nap. “Drinks?”

“Please,” Takeru nods, and Yusaku just grunts, heading right for the first-aid kit in the supplies closet and downing three painkillers, dry. He should bandage himself up, if only to keep everything straight as he heals. “I’m sorry I was late to your area. Good thing Revolver was around to help you!”

Kusanagi-san’s eyebrows raise and he shoots Yusaku a pointed look, but he can’t care about him judging his non-relationship with a questionable vigilante when he’s barely awake enough to stand—not that he ever cares, of course.

“He saved me again, so—” Yusaku starts, admittedly a weak defense, but he can’t help it.

Kusanagi-san shrugs. “I didn’t say a thing!”

“They were making out when I got there,” Takeru points out, winking at Yusaku and smiling like he’s innocent. Yusaku knows better; he’s seen his search history. Those glasses and boy-next-door smile can’t fool him. “Revolver’s hands sure like to wander.”

“Shut up and help me,” Yusaku snaps, and Kusanagi-san chuckles. Takeru scrambles to stand up and grab the bandages off his hands, so while he unrolls them Yusaku sighs and tries not to pass out once he sets his ass on his own seat, taking off his shirt as Takeru maneuvers around him to patch him up. Kusanagi-san whistles at the canvas of his skin and offers an apologetic smile. He’s not even angry at the comment; he just really, really wants a nap.

Taking that chance to remind Yusaku he exists, Ai peeks out from the pocket of his hoodie and decides to scare the shit out of Kusanagi-san by

stretching out his hand to poke his shoulder. “Hey, are your hotdogs any good?”

To Kusanagi-san’s credit, he does not scream, but he does pale considerably.

“Yusaku,” he starts, voice even, as his hand slowly inches towards his keyboard like he’s about to use it as a weapon, as if Ai were a simple bug. He doesn’t even care about the implications of having somehow birthed someone that could be considered a bug, Yusaku’s too tired for emotions right now. “What the hell is that? A walking health code violation?”

Yusaku thinks about it for a bit. “I did find him in a sewer.”

The panicked glare he gets for that almost makes him grin. Almost.

“Why is everyone so rude here, Yusaku-chan? You barely even reacted to me!” Ai scrambles further out of his hoodie and sits down on the table like he’s been doing so his whole life, which is a tricky concept, because he’s been alive for little more than a couple of hours but at the same time it’s been sixteen years— Takeru touches a tender spot, which snaps him out of his thoughts, back to the present and the drink pushed into his hand. Kusanagi-san does not approve of Ai moving or *talking* for that matter, but he’s smart enough to not touch him. Yusaku is sure his stickiness isn’t nicer to the naked skin. “Fire boy here screamed!”

“I haven’t heard that nickname in years,” Takeru mumbles nonchalantly, guiding Yusaku’s arms upwards so he can properly wrap him up, and Yusaku rolls his eyes as a response. “I kind of missed it.”

Kusanagi-san very subtly grabs a few napkins and then dumps them over Ai’s head, who just rolls in them like he just got gifted a blanket. It’s actually kind of cute, not that Yusaku will say that out loud, but it does make him notice that something is coming off Ai’s body... oh no. He would have to deal with that later. He couldn’t have Ai walking around letting off *juices*.

“So, what exactly is...?” Kusanagi-san drifts off, so Ai helpfully provides his name with a thumbs up. Kusanagi stares at him like, well—like he’s seen an alien. “What is Ai?”

Yusaku gives him the short, simple explanation he gave himself, wincing when Takeru pulls at the bandages and adjusts them accordingly when they prove to be too loose. “He’s the alien I got my DNA spliced with. Found him in a sewer; his bits came looking for me, I believe. Revolver called him an Ignis, and he knows about the Hanoi Project.”

Kusanagi-san sits down on his chair heavily and sighs, looking out of his depth. Yusaku can relate.

“Ok, then... what are we going to do with him?”

The question makes Yusaku’s thought process halt, and then start back up so fast he feels dizzy. His concussion probably hasn’t healed yet, so it’s probably for the best he’s not taking that nap he wants. It occurs to him they should discuss Hanoi’s attack first, but his brain is too scrambled and Ai seemed like a priority right now.

“Revolver talked about him like he knew what he is, and he wanted to take him away—I obviously didn’t let him,” Yusaku frowns at the floor, reliving the fight in his head, and comes to the obvious conclusion. “If Revolver wants him, it’s safe to assume Hanoi does too... which means Ai either has the knowledge they want or *is* something they want.”

All three of them stare at Ai after hearing those words, and he stops rubbing the napkins all over himself to stare back with a sheepish expression. When none of them talk Ai seems to get a bit nervous, but he still speaks out, probably because he has a good sense of self-preservation. Yusaku wishes he had one of those.

“To be honest, I can tell you lots about what I am but I don’t really know anything about these Hanoi fellas,” he says, and swallows when all they do is blink at him. Behind him, Takeru stifles a chuckle, because Ai looks like he’s scared for his life. “I know the things they did to the kids and who did

it, but probably the same things you already know about them. I should mention, though..."

Kusanagi-san taps his fingers on his desk and frowns, looking suspicious. Yusaku only stares as Takeru checks his bandages again and deems them good enough, glancing at him standing up out of the corner of his eye and seeing him moving his chair back to its place in front of Kusanagi-san's desk. "What is it?"

"If Hanoi wants me... then they're going to want my friends," Ai slumps his shoulders, looking genuinely distraught. Yusaku feels some sympathy he tries to smother down, but it rings too close to home for him to ignore it. "Technically I don't know them yet, but I can feel them... they're like family."

"So there are more of you?" Takeru asks, voice kind, and Ai nods. "Where are they?"

"I don't know," he admits with some reluctance, and it makes Yusaku exchange a look with Kusanagi-san. The more Ai talked, the more Yusaku's perception of him changed. He couldn't decide if more of him were a good thing or not yet. "There's one for every child that was kidnapped. I could probably take you to an approximation of where they are, but since Yusaku-chan woke me up they must be following closely. Their own tracers are going to start looking for their partners over the next week."

Yusaku blinks, trying to process the new information as fast as possible and getting increasingly frustrated at his own stumbling over his unorganized thoughts. "Tracers?"

"My bits you crushed!" Ai clarifies sounding cheerier than what the words would suggest, and Kusanagi-san chokes on his soda. Takeru just snorts, hiding behind his own drink. "What?"

"How do they work?" Yusaku reaches out for his hoodie and then thinks about how he was carrying Ai, with his sticky juices, all the way from downtown. He'd rather just... take a spare shirt from the staff closet instead.

“Well, there comes a time in our lives in which we reach enough age to come out of our little cocoons and be with our mommies,” Ai’s voice becomes incredibly cheesy as he explains this, and he even props his head upon his hand like he’s retelling a nice story. Somehow, he manages to look slightly mischievous. “So to avoid getting lost and killed and make sure we find them our cocoon sends out a search party!”

Takeru is the one that speaks up, leaning back in his chair comfortably but having an otherwise disturbed expression on his face, fidgeting nervously with his straw. “So, am I gonna find one of those in the shower?”

“*Maybe—*”

“If you don’t know where they are, how can we find them?” Yusaku interrupts. He doesn’t want to think about how high his chances of coming across Ai-bits in the shower could have been. “There must be a way.”

Ai stares at him with a grim face and then slowly shakes his head.

“I have a vague idea of where they could be, but someone else could get to them first,” Ai hesitates, glancing in between the three of them like he isn’t sure his words will be welcome. It makes Yusaku nervous, like a switch suddenly got flipped inside of him. The feeling is gone as soon as it comes, but it does leave his mind reeling with even more questions. “The only one who may know for sure...”

Yusaku knows the answer before he’s even finished. “Is Revolver. And I just told him to fuck off.”

“You did?” Kusanagi-san asks, sounding genuinely confused. Yusaku can’t blame him; he knows he talks about Revolver as often as a schoolgirl with a crush or an obsessed fanboy would, but he just does it for the job, no other reason at all, really—or at least that’s what he tells them. “What did he do now? Deny you a kiss?”

“I was witness to an extremely long mating courting so I would say no!” Ai quips, and Yusaku shoots him a glare so venomous he hides under his napkin. Traitors, all of them.

“We had an argument,” Yusaku says, trying to keep himself from sounding defensive, but Takeru’s eyebrows raising and his incredulous blinking tells him he isn’t successful. He can hear the incredulous ‘*again?*’ he’s holding back. “He probably knows exactly what Hanoi is after, but he refused to tell me—as he usually does.”

“Does that mean we have to go against him too?” Takeru groans, throwing his head back against his chair, and Kusanagi-san nods in understanding. Yusaku frowns; they seem too laidback about this for his taste. “Yusaku, no offense but I really don’t want to see you angst over him—”

“I don’t *angst*—”

“Then you brood,” Kusanagi-san chuckles, raising his hands in defense when Yusaku glares at him too. “Can’t you two just—”

“No,” Yusaku spits out the word. Everyone quiets down at that, but Ai keeps looking at him like he wants to say something about it but doesn’t dare. Yusaku would rather he keep it that way. “It’s not that simple.”

“Don’t we know it,” Takeru mumbles, so Yusaku kicks him in the shin with his good leg. He sticks out his tongue in response. “What are we doing, then? If Hanoi knows, and Revolver knows, and Ai barely knows anything, then what can we do that they aren’t already?”

Silence engulfs the room, and for once Yusaku comes up blank. He thought that having Ai would be enough to gain some advantage over the other players on the board, but he couldn’t have anticipated that his mission implicated an Easter egg hunt. If Revolver probably knows the locations already and Hanoi has the resources to find the rest of the Ignis, then looking for them themselves was going to be not only reckless but hopeless, a likely waste of time. They could come across any of them in the middle of their search, and they weren’t properly prepared for a solo assault against Hanoi or, despite how much it hurts to admit it, a fair, no holding back at all fight against Revolver. They lacked the manpower.

Ai surprises him by speaking up.

“Perhaps if you let me touch fire boy I could... come up with something?” He twirls his thumbs together, looking shyly up at them. Yusaku immediately exchanges a look with Takeru, who looks like his mind ran to the same thought as his, judging by his paleness. Kusanagi-san is the only one that doesn’t seem to have a dirty mind, because he just hums in question. “He’s one of the kids, so he’s linked to one of my friends! If you let me have a look at him I might be able to help.”

Takeru looks really awkward when he clears his throat. “Touch... where? For what?”

“Anywhere!” Ai throws him what looks like a grin. Takeru isn’t reassured. “I’m just gonna tap into that brains of yours for a sec, nothing more. Just have a quick look around.”

A pause, and then Takeru shakes his head. “I don’t think I’m comfortable with this.”

“Do it for the team,” Kusanagi-san shrugs, taking a sip of his drink. Yusaku just lets this happens; if he had to touch Ai without knowing he was covered in more than sewer waste, Takeru could handle a mind probe.

“I’ll hold your hand if you want,” Yusaku offers, and gets a glare in return. He shrugs. “I’m sure it won’t hurt. Right?”

“Right!” Ai agrees, stretching out a hand towards Takeru, who stares in growing hesitation. “Hey, it’s alright! I don’t bite friends.”

“Reassuring,” Takeru mumbles, and then locks eyes with Yusaku. A thousand words seem to be exchanged between them in that second, in which Yusaku probably wins an argument about this being a necessity; while getting to the Ignis before Hanoi or Revolver wouldn’t give them answers, it would give them leverage, perhaps just enough to be able to interrogate a pressed Revolver, with the advantage that they would be stopping any evil schemes Hanoi might try to do with the Ignis at their disposal.

Takeru sighs, knowing the Yusaku in his imagination has a point. “Fine. But, does it have to be right now? I do have class later, so I would rather my brain doesn’t fail me.”

Ah. Yusaku forgot college was a thing for a second there. Kusanagi-san chuckles, noticing how the perked up to attention at that. “Takeru does have a point there. This could have side effects. Hopefully not dangerous ones, but side effects nonetheless.”

“I would rather get it done right now...” Yusaku pauses, gauging Takeru’s reaction. He just frowns in annoyance. “...but Revolver is the only one who knows about Ai right now, and it’s not like he’ll run to tell Hanoi about it. They probably have their own way of knowing, but considering this was Kogami’s experiment and he’s gone now it might give us a day, two if we’re lucky, before they start hunting them down too.”

Kusanagi-san sets his drink down on his desk, nodding along to his words. “Yeah, Revolver is the one that might be a problem time wise. You think tonight is alright for this?”

He asks Takeru, who looks both uncomfortable but resigned. Yusaku genuinely feels bad about subjecting him to this, but it’s either that or finding a way that would put them on the rear end of the chase, even with their knowledge advantage over Hanoi. They don’t have the resources to search all of Den City, and asking for help would be involving people none of them want to get too involved with Hanoi. Go and Blue Angel would probably help, since they have developed a certain dislike of Hanoi over the years, thanks to the group being responsible for so many city-wide chaos and uptakes in criminal activities, but they have way too little knowledge of what is brewing right now to go to them with this at this stage.

“Tonight, then,” Takeru nods, and Yusaku feels relief in his chest. They make eye contact, and he knows without a doubt that he isn’t doing this against his will. Takeru is as willing to risk himself as he is, this is something they’ve both known since day one. Crossing his arms, he points at Ai with a thumb. “You’re gonna interrogate him now?”

Ai scrambles to stand up, looking scandalized. “Interrogate me!? Why? I’m on your side!”

Yusaku rolls his eyes and stands up, wincing at the tightness of his bandages. The painkillers are already wearing off, but the pain isn’t nearly as bad as before. He takes his hoodie and then grabs Ai with the edge of a sleeve, careful not to let him touch his skin, and starts making his way to the door of the hotdog truck.

“Until we’re completely sure we can trust you, you’re a hostage.”

“Aw, not fair!”

Ai whines about him not having any ulterior motives all the way down through the front door of their basement level apartment until Yusaku gets into the bathroom, at which point he stops talking mid-sentence and looks around curiously. Yusaku drops him in the sink counter and then throws the hoodie at their laundry basket, looking into their drawers for some brand new soap and a soft hand towel.

“Are you going to bathe me?” Ai asks, sounding impossibly excited. Yusaku bites back a sigh and nods. “Aw, I knew you cared for me after all!”

“Shut up, you’re just filthy,” Yusaku retorts, ignoring the several complains that follow his statement. “What? It’s true. I found you in a sewer, not to mention you probably have some leftovers from your cocoon. I’m not carrying you around like that.”

“It’s not my fault I ended up there!” Ai shrieks unnecessarily loudly when Yusaku opens up the sink and grabs him, sticking him under the water stream for three counted seconds without mercy. Ai comes out gasping. “Oh, that’s cold. That’s really cold. I don’t like water.”

“Get used to it,” Yusaku shakes his head, and then grabs the hand towel to get it wet and soapy to rub it across Ai’s skin, watching some grime and yellowish fluids come off with no small amount of disgust. He can’t waste any time though, because he needs to take a shower, eat and hurry up to class, so this is the perfect time to interrogate him. He has, of course, many questions, but he should probably start with what he knows next to nothing about: “Tell me, what are the Ignis, exactly? How are you here?”

Ai hums in thought, probably coming up with the best explanation he’s capable of as Yusaku rinses the towel and runs it over him again, careful not to pull or push or rub too hard. “From what I recall from my time as a lab tube baby, before my proper incubation process started, Dr. Kogami was tasked with studying some DNA samples from a spaceship that crashed on Earth about, what, eighteen, nineteen years now? Apparently, the planet of the, ahem, *visitors*, is gone, from what they could recover from the ship’s log, and they hoped they ones driving the ship were able to find an inhabitable planet to start up the race again, but they died in the landing.”

Yusaku frowns. “The ship records were in a human language?”

“Eh, I’m not sure? This information was downloaded into my consciousness during the time of the experiments, but if I had to guess I would say the ship probably had available translations in case of an emergency,” Ai raises his arms over his head when Yusaku starts rubbing his sides, looking like he’s enjoying the attention, as well as telling the story. Yusaku must admit he’s decent enough at it. “But that’s not the important stuff for you. Dr. Kogami managed to figure out how our biology worked, our advantages over humans, and wanted to replicate that, but he needed further grow and test tubes and no companion meant no development from us, since our growth has to be in consciousness as well.”

“Companion?” Yusaku pauses, and Ai whines in reiteration, so he goes back to running a finger across his little back with the towel, turning him around to reach properly.

“Yeah, we depend on a mother consciousness to be able to grow our own. He wanted to ignore that part of the process, but we weren’t developing properly. He was frustrated, so...”

"So he found someone to link you to so you would naturally develop," Yusaku finishes quietly for him when he trails off, and only sighs at Ai's nod. It was to be expected. "So Dr. Kogami figured out what you needed to give him the results he wanted, spliced our DNA with samples from yours to make us compatible and then...?"

It wasn't hard for Yusaku to come to that conclusion. It was logical for him that if you need an alien being to be connected to a host of sorts for them to grow and you have no compatible subjects you create the compatibility yourself, force the link between the consciousnesses through biological trial and error until something clicks. It makes him feel suddenly miserable, to have confirmation of Kogami Kiyoshi's fucked up ideas, but it's not surprising at all. He wonders if this is part of the things Revolver wants to keep from him, the details of the procedures done on them, and bitterness rises in his throat, simultaneously hot and cold as winter air, almost painful. An outsider has no right to decide what's best for him, for *them*. He won't let him.

He still wonders *why*, though.

"It's a bit fuzzy, but I believe he was disappointed with how slowly we were growing once our cocoons took shape. It took me a decade and a half to wake up, as you know!"

"Do you know what his objective was?" Yusaku asks, his voice softer than he expected, and Ai shakes his head. "How do you even know all this?"

"Dr. Kogami probably wanted us to know he created us so we would be easier to probe at with his scientist tools," Ai shrugs apologetically at him, but Yusaku doesn't blame him for his lack of knowledge about a sociopathic scientist with a God complex. In his eyes, Ai is just another victim—brought to life only because a greedy man couldn't mind his business. "I really don't know. I have more details on the specific procedures, what they did to your body—"

"That's fine, I can get an idea," Yusaku interrupts, willing some sudden nausea away and rinsing out the hand towel once more, to scrub the soap

off Ai's body. He tries not to think of white walls and endless hours of being poked out under his skin. "How do the Ignis usually breed?"

"From what I know, I would have one parent that puts out one egg-like thing – it's hard to describe in human terms – that's biologically and mentally linked to us, allowing us to grow and develop our own personalities based on their feedback. Kinda like, we're them and they're us."

Yusaku pauses. "So you don't have only one parent?"

Ai falls into silence and Yusaku waits, but he only gets a shrug. Which is... suspicious. "You grew me, Yusaku-chan. And some of your friends grew the others. It's funny that you're all so close together!"

"Must be fate," Yusaku mumbles, not pleased with his deflection. He takes notice for further questioning later, but for now, he's more curious about the things Ai knows and doesn't. "What's your purpose, then? You said your planet is gone so—"

"I'm not sure myself," Yusaku lets go of Ai, letting him sit on the edge of the sink, kicking his legs in thought. He looks carefully devoid of any negative emotion, but Yusaku suspects that it's a screen. There's no way he isn't curious about what he was created for, or what he must do from this day forward. Still, he waits in silence, putting the soap away and getting the excess of water off the hand towel he used to clean him to throw it in the laundry bin. He could have probably put some more effort into getting him properly washed, but it was getting late he hasn't even had lunch yet—he's not looking forward to the consequences of healing without having a proper meal first. He's *starving*.

Eventually, Ai speaks up. "You know, I don't really care about any funny plans you or those Hanoi guys may have... I just want to be with my friends, and with my kin—and that includes you, just so you know!"

Yusaku can't help but snort. "You think you have a choice about the role you'll play? This is bigger than both of us, from what I can gather."

“Then we’ll face it together!” Ai pumps a fist into the air, water dripping down his body and flying drops hitting Yusaku in the face. His expression is determined, like there’s no space to question his statement. As if just because he said it, it would become a fact that Yusaku would be beside him at all times. It feels almost reflective, in a way, of his own confidence regarding his investigation, the years of chasing down criminals and breaking more bones than he could keep track of, both his own and other’s.

It hits him that perhaps Ai is not being overdramatic when he calls him his mom. He truly is somehow *his*, in a very direct but simultaneously indirect way. Their personalities couldn’t be more different, but they at least share that ironclad security in themselves and their ideas. Is it foolish that Ai believes he will be able to just live in peace? Yes, but Yusaku was as much of a fool once, trying to run from himself and his past before he promised to himself no more of that.

“Yusaku!” Takeru calls, slamming a hand against the bathroom door and knocking three times, startling him out of his thoughts. Ai is now trying, unsuccessfully, to dry himself up with the edge of a hand towel hanging from an ornament on the wall he’s sure none of them ever use, so he reaches out to help him, wrapping him tightly in it and holding him closely. “Are you done yet? Kusanagi-san made lunch for us and I *really* need a shower.”

“Give me ten minutes and I’ll be ready. Eat without me,” Yusaku answers, and then opens the bathroom door to shove Ai into his arms. He gives Takeru’s surprised eyes a hard stare. “Don’t let him out of your sight—or near the toaster for that matter.”

He closes the door to insulted screaming and grins.

Yusaku’s content mood lasts about two hours, one of which he spends napping and the other trying to figure out what to do with Ai while he’s in

class. Kusanagi-san will be working and Takeru's hands are just as tied with his own schedule to stick to, so it's with a great wariness that he knocks on Jin's bedroom door, holding Ai in his hands and hoping for the best.

Miraculously, the door opens.

“Yeah?” Jin asks, leaning against the door frame and looking down at him so Yusaku wouldn’t have to crane his neck up too much. He’s almost as tall as his brother, but not even half as strong, and his voice as soft and kind as ever. Right now, he looks like one would expect a constantly exhausted online college student and hermit would look: pale, messy, with wrinkled Pokémon pajamas and dark bags beneath his eyes. Yusaku has no doubt he looks the same.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I need a favor,” Yusaku says, and then looks pointedly down at Ai. Jin follows his gaze and seems to do a double take, blinking and going as far as to rub his eyes to confirm what he’s saying. Ai shoots Jin what was probably meant to be an encouraging look, waving at him, but he just stares and gives no answer, so Yusaku continues. “Would you mind watching Ai until I’m back? I don’t trust him enough to leave him alone.”

Jin’s brain seems to plug back in. “Is this... your new pet? Is it a reptile or something?”

“Hey! I’m my own person, thank you very much,” Ai huffs, interrupting the words that were about to come out of Yusaku’s mouth, and Jin actually takes a step back, looking even more baffled and confused than before at hearing him talk. “You look like a good kid so I’ll let this one slide, but watch yourself!”

“Yusaku,” Jin starts, his voice full of disturbed wonder. He’s just glad he isn’t screaming. “Is this a superhero thing?”

“Something like that,” Yusaku nods, and then extends his arm as if to let him grab Ai off him. This may be an issue, because he’s clinging to him like a koala to a tree, but he’s not going to expose Ai to college students. Not yet. “Are you in?”

Jin makes a noise Yusaku can't quite place, and then receives a nonchalant shrug. It seems that whatever shock he felt is already gone. "Sure, he looks funny. Does he like Doritos?"

"Don't feed him Doritos," he says at the same time Ai screams an enthusiastic 'yeah!', and then rolls his eyes. "We don't know what could happen if he eats that."

"Time to find out then," Jin meets his eyes, a twinkle of mischief that reminds him of his brother shining in his eyes, and Yusaku thinks about it for one second too long. Ai has now stood up on his arm, precariously balanced, and is *begging him* to let him try the snacks.

Aw, hell. Whatever. "If he gets sick—"

"I'll take full responsibility," Jin finishes, and Ai actually *jumps* at him, landing on his shoulder and making him stumble more out of reflex than out of shock. His voice is shaky and strangled when he talks, but he seems to quickly warm up to Ai's attempts to nuzzle him. "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

"I'll miss you, mom, but I can't miss this chance!"

Jin grins at Ai's comment, and Yusaku sighs and shrugs. The door is closed in his face and Yusaku stares, trying to ignore the unease creeping its way up to his chest. There was nothing to worry about, a few snacks wouldn't kill an alien, and Ai seems to have some sense of self-preservation, so he probably wouldn't eat something he wasn't positive about being able to digest—

It occurs to him that he's worrying too much about an alien he met not even twelve hours ago, and he turns around to go find Takeru so they can take the train together. He's sure everything will be alright and no one would die.

And if Ai does like Doritos, then at least Yusaku knows he's not soulless and has some backbone— Jin only eats the flaming hot ones, so that was bound to be quite the experience. Good grief.

Notes for the Chapter:

was this worth it? yes.

4. two faced

Notes for the Chapter:

It's been a while! Really sorry about that, but in between finals week and no internet i haven't really had the time (or motivation) to write. This was supposed to be up a bit earlier but i very conveniently got sick. Nice.

Anyways, please enjoy 10k of Yusaku and Ryoken being stupid! There's plot if you squint.

Yusaku is assaulted from behind barely ten minutes after he steps a foot inside campus.

Thankfully, it is not a bioterrorist trying to kill him, nor any kind of physical attack that would worsen his still sore, miraculously not bleeding wounds. It wouldn't be classy for him to do that in the middle of the common grounds garden, over all the perfectly green grass. He doesn't want to bleed on the flowers. It's also a sunny day, the heat making him regret not picking a t-shirt instead of a sweater, and there are several students around, throwing Frisbees and studying in the ground and some even having sun showers, stretching like cats. At least half of them looked sleep deprived, and there was a guy tickling another one having a nap with a feather. It was very typical college student behavior, but Yusaku isn't reassured by it when he's hearing his name being called from the other side of the lawn.

The voice make his steps halt, and he turns just in time to avoid a collision as Miyu comes to a hurried stop in front of him, apparently having power walked her way over. She's wearing loose yoga pants and a crop top that proved she could break you in half if she wanted to, as well as an angry frown and sunglasses.

“Where the hell were you?”

She sounds pissed. Yusaku looks off to the side for a second, thinking of an excuse and wishing Takeru hasn't ditched him because he was running late. When he looks at her again, the sunglasses are on top of her head, messing up her fringe, and she's raising very insulted eyebrows at him. "I slept in."

Miyu looks like she might actually punch him. "*Again?*"

Yusaku takes a mindless step back at her aggression. He may have no sense of self-preservation most of the time, but he doesn't fancy getting even more beat up today. "Yes. I don't sleep at night, it just doesn't happen."

"We missed you in yoga," she crosses her arms, huffing like he's being particularly stubborn, which he is, and someone far away behind him whistles. Miyu makes a rude gesture at them, so Yusaku figures it wasn't anyone she liked. When she turns her eyes towards him again, he can't help but let his shoulders rise defensively. "This is like the third class you miss."

"I'm not a teacher," is Yusaku's weak protest, to which he only gets a smack on his arm. He winces; Miyu packs a good punch and has an even better aim. "What? I'm *not* a teacher."

"No, you're a model," Miyu agrees, but it feels like a threat. There's something incredibly steely about her blue eyes today, despite how bright and lively they usually are for their grey toned color. Yusaku feels like they're having two conversations at the same time, and he doesn't want to examine that too closely. "You're the only one besides me who can pull them off perfectly, and I can't explain the positions properly if I don't have you. I don't want to twist some poor inflexible soul around."

"You twisted *me*," Yusaku says, bordering on a whine. He would say he suffered to get this good at yoga, but he really didn't. Miyu just helped him get better. It hurt. "I don't see why I'm a requirement. I just do yoga for fun."

"As if you ever have fun," Miyu rolls her eyes, and Yusaku has enough self-respect to *want* to protest against that, but he's also aware that it's the truth. He won't lie to himself this once. "When was the last time you went on a date, huh?"

Well, Yusaku thinks, blinking in thought, that's one way to change the subject. "I don't date."

Miyu opens her mouth like she's about to tear him a new one, and Yusaku fears for his life for about two hot seconds until a hand falls on his shoulder from behind and Aoi steps forwards, shooting him a tiny smile as a hello and then wrapping her arms around Miyu, dropping a kiss on her cheek, resulting in her immediately changing her behavior completely. Yusaku tries not to show how relieved he is by the interruption.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class?" Miyu asks, her voice softer than it ever is when she's talking to anyone else, and Aoi pouts. Yusaku takes a step back, thinking he may be able to leave, but Miyu glances at him out of the corner of her eye and he stays where he is. She's apparently not done harassing him. When her eyes shift down at Aoi, her frown turns into one of worry. "You're also late. I had to eat by myself."

Aoi looks as beaten as Yusaku feels, which comes as no surprise. He figures being Blue Angel isn't any easier than being Playmaker, even if it comes with the perks of not being shot at by the police sometimes. "Sorry, I know we agreed to lunch, but there was traffic because of an attack downtown—"

"It's alright," Miyu interrupts, leaning down to kiss her and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. He looks away mostly for the sake of giving them privacy, and also because it feels wrong to watch Blue Angel, someone who's usually the life of the party, be looked after like she wouldn't be able to either drown them or sent them flying. He still doesn't really understand how her abilities work, even after so many years, but he isn't about to ask. That probably would break some sort of unspoken hero code or something.

Aoi smiles up at Miyu like she hung the moon in the sky, and Yusaku feels both happy for them and a bit uncomfortable by the open devotion. She turns towards him and sighs, inspecting him from head to toe with a careful eye, and then nodding when she comes to whatever conclusion she wanted. Yusaku again has the feeling there are *two* conversations going on, though the correct number would be three, because his conversation with Aoi seems to be completely different to the one he was having with Miyu.

I must still be concussed, Yusaku frowns, because his thoughts are really distracting. He didn't have this issue when the voice – apparently *Ai* – was still whispering in his head. He vaguely wonders if this is why Miyu looks so pissed off; maybe she's missing her voice too and getting worried about it. He wonders if the weird ringing Takeru mentioned has anything to do with this.

"Fujiki, you're spacing out," Aoi says, and Yusaku snaps her eyes in her direction, feeling a bit embarrassed. It's never his intention to *ignore* people, but sometimes he got carried away with himself, and the way his morning went guarantees that he has many important things to think about related to his life mission. Aoi, whose hair is pulled up in a messy bun, has a wrinkled blue blouse on, and is usually the one spacing out from exhaustion, looks very amused. "Had a busy night?"

Yusaku blinks at the out she just gave him, thinking it's a weird comment, and then looks at his shoes. "Insomnia is a bitch."

Miyu mumbles something under her breath that sounds kind of rude, so he glances at her and deadpans: "What are you even doing here still? Did you sign up for another elective?"

Miyu seems to bristle, and Aoi sets a hand on her shoulder to keep her from murdering him. Behind them, a guy's water bottle spontaneously explodes on his face. Yusaku feels lucky to not be the one exploding, so he'll count his blessings and say nothing about *that*.

"What's your major again?" He asks instead, and takes a step back when Miyu takes one forward. He's playing with fire here, but it does bring him some amusement to see Miyu fighting her instincts and not punch his teeth out for the sake of not causing a scene. Or murder him. Next time they sparred, she was probably going to be merciless.

"I hate you," Miyu throws her hands up helplessly, and Aoi giggles, leaning into her and whispering something in her ear. Miyu's cheeks get a bit pink, and Yusaku suddenly needs to tail it out of here. He makes eye contact with her, and Miyu raises her eyebrows, unspoken words floating between them. "You're really late, you know? Ryoken's not going to be pleased."

Yusaku rolls his eyes. “Keep out of my business.”

“I will when you get a date,” she counters, and Yusaku shakes his head and nods at Aoi before walking away, perhaps a bit quicker than necessary. He’s not running away, not at all. He’s just... making sure he won’t get roped into a discussion about his love life again. Yes. That was it. “I’ll tell him you ‘slept in’!”

Yusaku flips her off and goes on his way. Honestly, he couldn’t get one moment of peace.

If he’s being completely honest, Yusaku has no legitimate reasons to suspect anything is shady about Kogami Ryoken.

Kusanagi-san has pointed this out to him since the very beginning, and so has Takeru since he found out about him also living in Den City and attending the same university as them. They are both aware keeping an eye on him is necessary simply because he’s the son of Dr. Kogami and thus a possible threat or target for Hanoi, but there’s nothing remotely questionable about him if you ignore that little fact.

He lives alone, which isn’t odd for someone with a big inheritance and no close family members. He’s trying to become a pediatrician and thus is on his way to med school, but shows no interest for any of the subjects his father used to study, or at least not on very specific terms – people are allowed to care about genetics in a world filled with mutants and metahumans and all kinds of weird things, after all – and he mostly keeps to himself apart from his confusing friendship with Miyu and how he seems to be friendly towards just about anyone if they are not an asshole.

He’s also extremely generous and considerate. Yusaku tries and fails to not being impressed by it, but there’s a reason Kogami Ryoken’s jokingly known as a knightly gentleman among the student body. Yusaku would say

he has no idea how he ended up getting attached to him, except that it was obvious; Kogami Ryoken was so charming that it was impossible not to unconsciously try to get him to like you, which wasn't really the case with him— what actually endeared Yusaku to him was how he tried to understand him. Almost no one had ever done that before and it was a bit shocking to see such interest coming from such a flawless individual who seemed to have his life perfectly put together despite the fact that his dad was kind of crazy.

Yusaku will deny having developed a crush with time, but he will not deny he's absolutely whipped. No, it's not the same. There's a difference between wanting to have someone's babies and sighing at the mere thought of them.

And then there's the Revolver thing.

Another reason for Yusaku to be always increasingly frustrated with the over-dramatic smug asshole: his weird, complicated non-relationship with him doesn't allow him to pursue anyone else. Not that he *would*; apart from Ryoken he's really not interested in anyone else and quite likes it that way, because he isn't about to involve any civilians in the mess of a life he deals with. It is frustrating to look at Kogami Ryoken, feel something stirring in his chest, and then come across Revolver and get absolutely shit-faced with flirty words and kisses that shouldn't linger for hours though.

Yusaku shouldn't suspect anything of Ryoken, but he does. The lack of acknowledgment of his father or any other family member, the scars, his clever mind and the sharp tongue he struggles to bite down on has given Yusaku reason to think he's hiding something, and every time he falls through that rabbit hole he reaches one single possible, workable conclusion after hours of research and rereading files and registries and hacking the security cameras around his house.

Kogami Ryoken is working with Revolver.

That's Yusaku's strongest theory, if he ignores the other dozen that pop up in his head at ungodly hours of the night. The second strongest theory is that Ryoken *is* Revolver, but he can't trust himself to look more into that when he's so obviously biased to think that because of his personal

involvement with both of them. Takeru and Kusanagi-san don't really bother to look much into it, either because they don't care that much about Revolver's identity or they think Yusaku is insane. Both are valid thoughts; there has to be some degree of insanity to him for him to be able to put on a bodysuit and go out to punch terrorists in the face on a daily basis.

His proof is admittedly somewhat flimsy. Yusaku has several profiles that seem to fit Revolver's personality, and Kogami Ryoken *barely* fits only two of them. Their personalities seem to be compatible but not entirely similar; Ryoken doesn't seem to have a death wish non-related to college, for one, nor does he try to call Yusaku a fool every time he asks him something. He also doesn't seem to have invulnerable skin, but Yusaku hasn't quite tried to test that out yet. It would be weird to just punch Ryoken out of the blue to test it and he can't come up with an excuse for it because he's so *kind*.

There shouldn't be any confusion here, though. Revolver is also kind, and thoughtful, and even a bit of a gentleman, he just tries to outright deny it each time he shows it while Ryoken just shrugs helplessly, accepting it but not indulging in it, almost like he's not proud of it. Another similarity between them is the *money*, of course; Ryoken is absolutely loaded and Revolver, while not making it explicit, has implied he has the expensive resources he needs for pretty much everything. It's the most important thing he's been able to link between them, and paired with the fact that Ryoken lives in the middle of fucking nowhere, on a mountain cliff-side looking off to a beach, it could match up perfectly for them to work together.

It's a bit hard to think of hardened vigilante Revolver and considerate civilian Ryoken as a pair, but Yusaku's imagination certainly does wonders, and so does his investigation.

It's probably the reason why he looks for any signs of bruising or exhaustion on Ryoken's face when he comes into the classroom, twenty minutes late for class. He finds none, of course, but Yusaku has never seen Revolver be tired after a fight either. He might be grasping at straws in an attempt to make it all easier on his heart, but he wasn't going to acknowledge that at all. He constantly ignores his heart anyways, because that would just make his problems even more glaringly obvious and disrupting of the precarious balance his life is in.

Ryoken also doesn't seem frustrated or pissed off about anything, which is another disappointment; Revolver seemed to care an awful lot about him taking Ai away, and he was hoping Ryoken would somehow reflect that if they're the same person or working together. Instead, Ryoken looks up at him from his seat as he approaches with a soft smile and a wave of his hand towards the free seat beside him at the end of the third row, right up against the wall just as Yusaku likes it.

His heart flutters in his chest and Yusaku sighs. He's so glad the professor doesn't care about him, otherwise he wouldn't be able to just casually waltz in and sit down beside Ryoken like he always does. He should probably break that habit.

"Slept in again?" Ryoken asks in a whisper, leaning over from his seat and looking at him with eyes twinkling with humor. Yusaku wonders just how done he looks with life for him to be this amused.

"Yeah," he answers, looking straight ahead at the teacher and taking in a deep breath that almost makes him wince. His ribs are doing dramatically ok now, but there's soreness in that area now and the bruising will probably be there until tomorrow unless he takes another power nap. He sighs again, turning his eyes towards Ryoken. "I need a nap."

Ryoken snorts and seems to bite his own tongue, probably keeping himself from roasting what little there is left of Yusaku's dignity. "Had a busy night?"

Yusaku thinks of being blasted through a fucking wall, coming across an alien and making out with the smug asshole and shrugs. That was just his *morning*. Last night was relatively tame in comparison. "I guess."

"That explains the hickey, then," Ryoken says, and it takes Yusaku a second to process the words. His hand flies up to his neck, fingers pressing in and scrambling to find the supposed hickey. He winces when his nails rub against sensitive skin, proving Ryoken right. Why did he even have a healing factor if this kept happening? Ryoken's smile is absolutely devious, once again tickling Yusaku's thing for pointing out similarities between him and Revolver. He regrets ever waking up. "I guess that's a no to our date?"

Yusaku barely keeps himself from sighing out loud in frustration. He now distinctly remembers Revolver's lips on his neck at the same time he replays Ryoken's invitation from last week in his mind over and over again. It would be nice if he could just... combine the images into one, but *of course not*. He's been subtly trying to not lead Ryoken on for the sake of not getting his hopes up about him possibly being Revolver, but it's hard when every time he looks at him he is greeted by sweet smiles, starry eyes and ripped muscles trying to escape from the confines of his shirt sleeves.

He's absolutely helpless, which is why he says: "It's not a no, and it's also not a hickey. This was an accident—a lab accident."

Ryoken's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline, and he clearly struggles not to smirk and point out how ridiculous the second part of his statement is. Still, it's not unkind even if he seems a bit let down once the amusement passes, which Yusaku hates. There's probably nothing worse than Ryoken's disappointed expression; he's incredibly weak to it.

"I'm sure," he mumbles, and looks back towards the front of the classroom, to the teacher saying words he doesn't have enough of an attention span for. Yusaku didn't even bother with them when he arrived, which probably says a lot about how much he cares about this elective. He would be screwed if Ryoken didn't forgive his inattention so much, yet another thing about him that makes Yusaku feel guilty about Revolver; Ryoken is the reason he's not failing this class. "You should pay attention to the half hour we have left. Pointers for the next project."

Yusaku feels strangely hurt by the brushoff but keeps quiet about it. He has no right to ask anything from him when he refuses to give him a straight answer about having a date. He just... doesn't want to get Ryoken involved in case he isn't Revolver's assistant, or even Revolver himself. There's also his complicated feelings towards Revolver. It's not love. It can't be. He won't allow it, but there's this draw he has to him that burns him up on the inside and brings out his irrational side; Revolver makes him throw logic out of the window, and that isn't good. Especially now that he might actually make moves against him and actively try to actually hurt him instead of keeping him out of his business.

He's almost ashamed of how more often than not that asshole is in his thoughts, but he can't help it. Their paths are way too intertwined for him to avoid him completely. He wasn't supposed to get close to him quite like *this*, though. But it's too late to take it back, which does concern him at time.

Instead of paying attention like he's told to, though, Yusaku spends the rest of the class vaguely wondering if Ryoken and Revolver would be up for a threesome. He decides Revolver wouldn't like sharing him and leaves it at that for him. In Ryoken's case, he seems so desireless sometimes that Yusaku doubts he even has the libido required or the interest for something like this, and it might be weird to introduce the person he most definitely doesn't have a crush on to a vigilante just so he wouldn't have to make a decision between them and get away with having two boyfriends.

Not that Yusaku wants a boyfriend. Or two. Nope. Absolutely not. Much less so if one of them is Revolver.

He should stop lying to himself about serious matters.

He ends up taking notes he doesn't really understand because he missed the first twenty minutes of class and then some, but Ryoken just pushes his own towards him while shaking his head, finger-gunning at Yusaku's head as if to tell him he's dead unless he takes his help. Yusaku regrets taking an art elective out of all things. He did it to keep an eye on Dr. Kogami's son, which is how he even met Ryoken, and he's only know starting to realize this is all his own damn fault for not being able to keep duty separate from pleasure. Not that he's even getting off with him, or Revolver, which only makes it even worse. With a sigh, Yusaku looks down at Ryoken's fancy but otherwise understandable handwriting and mourns the death of good life decisions. It's not like he's ever had any, but he likes to think not killing the people he interrogates and brings to law counts.

By the end of class Yusaku feels like his mind is numb and decides he needs another nap. A *really* long nap. But, he has two other classes that he actually cares a lot about and he can't ditch them for a shuteye. He only came this early so he wouldn't miss seeing Ryoken at least once this week, despite knowing he would have to face questions about the date invitation

from last week. And now there's an alien in his place, eating Doritos with Jin and giving him anxiety about being away from Ai.

What even is his life? He's one-hundred percent sure it wasn't nearly this chaotic five years ago.

"Fujiki?" Ryoken calls once he notices Yusaku lingering in his seat and not picking up his stuff, shooting him glances out of the corner of his eye. "Everything ok? You're looking particularly miserable."

Yusaku snorts and shakes his head, avoiding eye contact as much as he can. It's hard; Ryoken's eyes feel almost magnetic at times. "I'm fine, I'm just thinking about some things."

"Alright," Ryoken hesitates, tapping his fingers on his desk and frowning. "I won't call you out on your lying but if it's about that date I invited you on, it's no big deal if you're not into it—"

"No, no, it's not that," Yusaku finds himself interrupting, the words hurried and breathy. He almost bites his tongue in his haste to speak. "It's not you at all, I'm just figuring out some personal things. I just... I don't really have time. But it's still not a no."

So much for not leading him on, his brain provides, and he almost misses the whispers in the back of his mind to distract him from his own thoughts. Ugh.

Ryoken stares in passive silence for a couple of seconds as if he's waiting for something, maybe some more elaboration on his part, and Yusaku tries to feel like he's not lying, because he's *not*, not really, but there's a weird feeling taking over him that just serves to makes him internally cringe at his words. He realizes with horror that it's fear of rejection and almost face palms himself.

Ryoken blinks and smiles at him, his eyes boring into Yusaku's very soul.

"I'll be waiting, then," he says, and then finally stands up and walks away, leaving him alone in the empty classroom. Yusaku stares at the spot

between his shoulder blades with more longing that he should until he disappears out the door.

Once he's sure Ryoken is out of earshot, Yusaku sighs so loudly he thinks his soul may have leaked out of his body, then slams his head down on his desk, wincing when he feels the pain and heard it crack but welcoming it nonetheless. He groans a bit to himself and takes a deep breath, squeezing his eyes shut.

He doesn't want to go to class.

By the time his classes are over Yusaku has a headache and a deep hatred of math. It's not often that he's unable to completely understand a math class in particular, but his concussion from that morning apparently did wonders for him today, even though he thought the nap took care of that. Still, he has things to do, like make sure Jin didn't turn Ai into an alien version of a shut-in through snacks and video games.

Thankfully, that's not the case. But he would have preferred that to opening the front door to find a vampire on the couch chugging down soda.

Instinct makes him block the door to keep it from escaping and immediately reach out for his Taser, but then Jin comes out of the kitchen looking nonchalant as ever and sits beside their vampire-looking surprise guest. It takes longer than it maybe should have for him to realize what's going on.

"Is that..." he drifts off, refusing to accept it, but then the vampire turns around and grins excitedly, standing up from the couch in a hurry and walking towards him, its mouth opening around words that die down to a terrified whine when Yusaku points the Taser. "I swear, Ai, if this is you—"

"It is!" He says, raising his hands in defense, but Yusaku doesn't put down the Taser. The sleeves of the dated-looking clothes he has on bounce,

making Yusaku even more eager to use the Taser. He has way too much of a headache to deal with this. “I can explain!”

Yusaku takes one look at Jin, who’s just watching them with curiosity while eating snacks, and gets the urge to just give up and go to bed. He sighs instead. “You can *shape-shift*?”

“He liked a character on TV and suddenly he was there. Almost crushed me,” Jin speaks up, shrugging like this is just another normal day for him. The worse thing is that he can’t blame him for that; this is probably *not* the weirdest thing that has happened to him; the Hanoi Project probably takes that award. “It was neat.”

Yusaku looks at Ai’s vampire lord outfit and then at his face, squinting and detailing the long eyelashes, the sharp cheekbones and the jawline that could probably cut you if you fell on it. “That’s not how the characters’ face looks.”

Ai shoots him a sheepish smile that looks a bit too handsome and then points at the Taser. “I took some outside inspiration! Could you please put that down?”

Yusaku puts down the Taser, stuffing it back in his bag. Not because he was told to, but because he doesn’t want to know how a shape-shifting alien would react to electricity. Fuck, he really just wants to go to bed. He doesn’t want to deal with this. Why does he have things to do? It’s incredibly not fair.

Footsteps echo from the stairs behind him and Takeru sets his hands on his shoulders with a sigh leaning on him until Yusaku has to tense his body to keep himself from being dragged to the ground. “Buddy, you’re blocking the entrance—”

His words stop with some spluttering when he notices Ai the Vampire Lord and Jin tilting the snack bag over his mouth to get the leftovers.

“Are we being attacked?” He asks, bewildered. Yusaku just shrugs and steps closer to Ai, looking at him closely. He doesn’t look fake at all, which

is to be expected. He's come across shape-shifters before, but they weren't aliens as far as he was aware.

The mystery of why the hell Den City is such a center of mutant activity tugs at his thought process again, but he has to consider his priorities. He's not the only one looking into the city's anomalies; Go Onizuka has been at it for almost as long as the case as existed, and he knows Blue Angel has a connection to it somehow—she was the first powerful mutant to show up after Go. She keeps the details from them, but Yusaku has his own leads that both of them have looked over. He doesn't have the heart to tell them they're both biased for different reasons, but they actually do help because they know Playmaker is better at getting worthwhile information than they are.

The Knights of Hanoi create artificial mutants, subjects born out of endless hours, days, months, perhaps even years of experimentation, taking little pieces of what's probably the remnants of Ignis DNA they have lying around for it or using another means if Dr. Kogami's experimentation was completely destroyed after his death. Yet he's come across mutants that have confessed to being born with their abilities, things that he has difficulty confirming because usually there's barely any medical record of those individuals.

The cases might be correlated, but there were clearly several parties causing things at once. It could just be human evolution caused by some sort of catalyst, but Yusaku would have to look deeper into that theory and find the time to investigate it. He knows there was an event in New Domino City a couple decades back that might explain it, but it's too far-fetched.

He prefers to focus on the now.

"Turn back, Ai" Yusaku steps forwards, almost making Takeru fall off from the sudden unbalance. Ai pouts. "We have important things to do."

"Can't we have dinner first? Or wait for Kusanagi-san?" Takeru whines, so Yusaku thinks about it really hard. "I don't look forwards to being mind-probed..."

“No,” he says, then takes another steps towards Ai, who takes one backwards and almost falls off after stepping on his cape. “Are you planning on keeping that shape? I don’t approve.”

“I don’t know,” Ai shrugs, shooting him a smug smile that looks somewhat familiar and gesturing wildly with the cape, spinning around until he’s wrapped himself around it. “I like being tall!”

Yusaku frowns, opens his mouth, and then gets rudely interrupting by the building *shaking*. It takes them all by surprise, of course, because buildings don’t shake; Takeru falls on his ass and drags Yusaku down to his knees with him while Jin hides under the table. Ai just stares in confusion for a few seconds, trying to keep himself on his feet, but eventually falls over as well thanks to the cape. Yusaku hears things breaking all over the apartment, and the sounds of people screaming bloody murder outside. He recognizes it as an earthquake, of course, but it’s just *odd*. Den City doesn’t get earthquakes. It just doesn’t happen. Den City is relatively peaceful when it comes to natural disasters – other types of disasters, not so much – and they haven’t had one ever since the incident that created the New Domino City, and even that was just a side effect of it and *mild*, in comparison to some of the things that happened in other cities.

As suddenly as it began, the earthquake stopped.

Yusaku blinks, processing his senses as carefully as he can: the people screaming coming from the open door to the stairwell, the car alarms, the strange ringing, loud whispering in his ears that’s incredibly distracting and going up on volume with every second, how Jin is covering his ears under the coffee table and mumbling for something to stop, the way Ai is staring at the ground with empty eyes, how Takeru struggles to stand up, his beating heart.

This isn’t normal.

Then another earthquake starts.

Technically, the earthquake isn't Ryoken's fault.

In his defense, neither of them could have anticipated that hiking into the mountain that looks off to Stardust Road to look for the Ignis sleeping under it without much of a contingency plan was perhaps not a good idea. He thought everything was going well— they drove around the mountain from the mansion, found a good parking spot once they reached the hiking path, then Ryoken used his own memory and Spectre as a map to find the Ignis.

And they did, which is why Ryoken counted this as a victory so soon. Of all the Ignis, the one that was linked to Spectre was the hardest to find; it was in a very deep underground cave with an entrance so easy to miss that it seemed fabricated — that's because it was, mostly, but nature helped throughout the years — and required hours of hiking. He was planning on going right to it after his encounter with Playmaker that morning but, well.

He's weak for teasing Fujiki Yusaku out of his cold exterior, no matter what name he's using.

"That's quite irresponsible, Ryoken-sama," Spectre had said to him when he announced he was going to his only class that afternoon, wearing a smirk and a raised eyebrow as weapons. Ryoken had winced, because of course Spectre was going to call him out on his questionable decisions. "I hope you're not lingering this time? You wouldn't want to pressure Playmaker into a date after such a blank response last week—"

"I regret not paying you every day of my life," Ryoken answered, scowling at him but knowing he was right, as always. "Maybe you would actually shut up if you had a reason to respect me."

"It's never late to try!" Was Spectre's answer, to which Ryoken could only glare. He hates him sometimes, even though he would definitely be dead in a ditch somewhere if it wasn't for him. They never mean it because of that; their friendship runs deeper than blood and they have a quiet understanding of the other that sometimes amazes him. The teasing is just a way to cope,

to escape the weight that drags Ryoken down every day. Still, Spectre had a point, the Ignis are far more important than Playmaker and always have been. Ryoken just... forgets.

He knows it's not a good justification, but it feels like that when his days are reduced to countless hours of research, coming up with contingency plans for the previous contingency plans, training, brooding and taking out his feelings on whatever thug he can get his hands on. Playmaker is someone that just manages to pull him out of the loop, be it for a few seconds or minutes and sometimes hours – so many rooftops in the early mornings – but never days. He allowed Fujiki Yusaku to get close to him just to have a little bit more of that for a set time, but he almost came to regret it when he had to pretend ignorance at whatever was troubling him or what he was actually doing, like today. Not like Ryoken can complain out loud; he brought this upon himself and screwed himself even further when he *asked him on a date*.

He has no defensive argument about that. At all. It just happened and served to make himself jealous... of himself. He's not proud of it. He was just curious which of them he liked more; his truthful tortured asshole personality or his fake innocent civilian persona. He didn't expect him to be into *both*.

The earthquake, though. That, he does have a good excuse for, and it is that Spectre totally fucked over the '*get it down softly*' part of the plan. He can admit it was an accident; the Ignis's cocoon had been precariously perching on the edge of a cliff inside the cave that looked off to a water body that Ryoken knew connected to the one where another of the Ignis rested; even if the relation ran down to the beach, it's still there. Ryoken didn't set the cocoon down in that exact place when he left the Ignis to grow, but he didn't anticipate it would become so big and... sticky.

Spectre was supposed to move the whole area of earth around cocoon so they could move it safely and take it back to the mansion without waking it – Ryoken rented a van *just* to do this – but it only took them thinking the foil under them was stable enough to step closer, Spectre to trip and his balance to be thrown off for everything to go downhill really quickly.

At first, the Ignis cocoon didn't look to be shaken by the fact that it was very aggressively dumped onto the ground and almost off the edge of the cliff, but then it started to morph with loud, wet sounds that managed to send shivers down his spine, the light coming from it blinking in and out with increasing, worrying speed until it became the size of his fist, round and sleek. Spectre watches in fascinated silence, and Ryoken hears the soft buzzing, the crackle of what sounds like the whisper of a voice reaching out before it goes quiet, cuts off and starts again like static. Spectre must hear it continuously though, just as he heard the other Ignis waking up and just as Miyu claimed she did when she cornered him after his class was over.

The buzzing stops just as the Ignis obtains its humanoid shape; it looks different from the one Playmaker obtained, which is to be expected. Ryoken was careful when he hid them after the lab was dismantled, and he knew that the differences in environment would affect each of them differently and come to reflect on their experimentation partners; the kids wouldn't even notice the changes despite the magnitude of them until the Ignis were completely acclimated to their new natural life conditions. He remembers watching Spectre for weeks afterwards until finally the garden went insane overnight, and he has to admit his choice for each place wasn't perhaps ideal for children to suddenly develop abilities around, but back then it was more important for them to disappear than for the subjects to be safe.

That of course was an ill-fated decision; the folder full of every piece of public and private information available about the accident involving the only of the subjects that met an unfortunate end because of it proves it. Spectre tried to tell him it wasn't his fault and that he couldn't have known it would end like that but—

It doesn't matter. He can't change the past.

The Ignis looks at them, tiny blue eyes measuring them up, and Spectre and Ryoken take a simultaneous step forwards. It takes one back until it's pressed against the walls of the cave, a blank expression meeting their quiet anticipation at what it might do. It wasn't part of the plan for the Ignis to wake up since it would be harder for them to take it back to the mansion like that, but now they just had to improvise. Ryoken believes he's decent at improvising, but it doesn't mean that he enjoys it.

“Hello,” he says, trying to be casual, but it’s hard when you’re very obviously loaded with weapons. He tries to hide the hand that’s holding the alien dagger behind his back, moving closer to Spectre to block the Ignis’ view. Maybe he should have listened to Spectre and left it behind. It just stares back and forth between the two of them, blinking; Ryoken tries not to feel uneasy. “Do you know who we are?”

Static crackles in Ryoken’s brain, loud and distracting, but he shows no outward reaction. Spectre flinches, which means the Ignis is clearly doing *something*, but he just lets it happen in tense silence. Finally, it speaks, a gravelly voice echoing in Ryoken’s brain and ears, faint and slightly shaky. He knows it’s *him* that’s messing with the audio quality, though, and focuses on what’s coming in through his ears.

“You’re my kin, almost,” it says the words looking at Spectre first, eyes lingering for a few seconds and then switching to Ryoken. There’s something about that look that sends shivers down his spine, like it *knows*. He wouldn’t be surprised. “But you... aren’t and yet are?”

Ryoken wants to tell it to get out of his head, but it’s best to be gentle here. To detain the Ignis in a place out of Hanoi’s reach is his responsibility and principal goal right now; he would try to destroy them if he wasn’t sure that would have serious repercussions on the experimentation partners. He still doesn’t know what happened to the Ignis of the kid that passed away, or the state of the one that corresponds to Kusanagi Jin, but he has... ideas. He isn’t eager to find those Ignis in particular.

“It’s complicated,” Ryoken nods, and then gestures towards Spectre, briefly making eye contact with him before looking back at the Ignis. “You should be able to understand him better.”

The Ignis nods, and curiosity flashes across its face, its expression lifting up slightly. “I do. He gave me life. I’d like to thank you for that.”

Ryoken takes a deep breath and watches Spectre struggle to come up with an answer. This is why he didn’t want the Ignis to wake up, but he knew this was inevitable. Just like Playmaker, Spectre is going to be drawn to his partner and immediately form a bond he can only hope to begin to

comprehend. His efforts to keep them apart come from a perhaps sick need to keep people that have suffered at the hands of his father away from the main game, but he's learned over the last few years that he can't avoid that. He could when he and Spectre were just kids on a lab and he had more leverage over what may have come to happen to him, but now it's more complicated; he never tried to actively keep Spectre from the truth, because he figured out that was impossible, but Playmaker didn't have to get so deeply involved for things to work out. Ryoken's been painstakingly planning this for years, and his interference has already messed up things for him, made him throw who knows how many safety measures out of the window.

Still, he looks at Spectre going soft and almost wants to pull him away. It's an odd feeling. He's never had to worry about him when it came to the Ignis before.

"There's no need to thank me," Spectre speaks up, his voice far more gentle than Ryoken's heard in years, and he feels the fight that he showed towards Playmaker drain out of him with a sigh. He almost regretted that now, hours later, because he really should have known Playmaker wouldn't listen and avoided an overreaction, but it's far too late to dwell on it. He makes up for it now, in his mind, by letting Spectre have this, even if it's just for a few minutes. "I was only a little helper."

"That's an oversimplification of your role," the Ignis brings a hand up to its chin, orange skin making a wet sound at the contact. Ryoken almost feels tempted to take a sample out of the remnants of the cocoon just out of simple curiosity, but he squashes down the thought. He doesn't want to use the lab for any of that, not ever. "Though this is confusing. I was supposed to go looking for you, not the other way around. We have developed enough to do so by ourselves. Are the others awake as well?"

Ryoken exchanges a look with Spectre. "Number six woke up earlier today."

The Ignis blinks up at them, wary, so Spectre takes a step forwards, kneeling over it and offering his hand. The Ignis stares for way too long to not be awkward, apparently confused, and Ryoken doesn't know if this is

how the other Ignis behaved towards Playmaker if this is just a particular case. It didn't seem to be quite as socially awkward as this one, though, but that could be related to its unique development conditions.

"Number six..." the Ignis drifts off, still staring, and then looks right at Ryoken, bluntly ignoring Spectre's offered hand. Ryoken clenches his fist tight around the knife, trying not to appear tense. He knows which question is next. "Number six should be with you. Where are they?"

"With its other partner," Ryoken is glad he's not lying, because the Ignis would probably be able to tell. Spectre clears his throat, trying to dispel some of the tension his words created, so he shrugs at the Ignis, trying to appear nonchalant. "We're here to retrieve you—"

"—and take you home with us," Spectre interrupts, talking over Ryoken's words. He turns to look at him with a pointed look, so Ryoken bites his tongue. Spectre is absolutely right; he should definitely stop talking like he's a secret government agent or some shit like that. It won't do them any favors. He should stop talking, period. Spectre smiles at the Ignis, trying to appear friendly, but it's just kind of creepy. "We can't have you going around alone. It's a big world out there with people that would try to hurt you, so we figured it was best to get to you directly instead of waiting."

"That's not how things are supposed to happen," the Ignis looks down at its hands, conflicted, but then shrugs. "But I trust you. Not so much the doctor's son, but I'm sure that if you are with him he must have no ill intentions."

Ryoken swallows at the mention of his parentage and decides that they've lost enough time. The sun is already setting, and part of his goal for today was to confirm the location of the second closest Ignis for the sake of making sure Hanoi wasn't already moving to get them. They should have no way of telling beyond eyewitnesses and a radar Ryoken made sure to fuck up a long time ago, but there's no way to tell if they don't have other sources of information. He doesn't know exactly how deep their web of spies is, but knowing it exists is already a blood-chilling thought. They can't get distracted.

“We need to leave now, then,” he says, trying to make the words sound like a suggestion for the sake of not making the Ignis suspicious. Something about how quiet it is and how it keeps asking questions tells him it’s too late for that. “It’s going to get dark and—”

“Where are we going?”

Ryoken clicks his tongue at the interruption and Spectre finally retreats his hand and stands up, probably being just as eager as he is about getting this over with and for the Ignis to stop asking questions. They both haven’t forgotten about the fact that they’re literally in the Ignis’ element.

“Somewhere safe,” Spectre is clearly trying to be reassuring, but the Ignis has none of it, crossing its arms and frowning. Spectre seems to recoil a little bit at it, not pleased at all, but he hides it behind a smile that looks a little too cheerful. “Nothing bad is going to happen—”

“I may have been born just now, but I’m not stupid,” the Ignis claims, and Ryoken immediately takes a step forwards, trying to block its way to the entrance in case it tries to escape. The Ignis stares right at Ryoken, looking like it is getting riled up with every word that comes out of its mouth. “I know what a kidnapping looks like. The reasons for human behavior might be a mystery, but the patterns are recognizable! Besides, what would *my* partner be doing with the doctor’s son? Why isn’t number six here as well? Why not wait for me to get out by myself? And *why* are you carrying a weapon?”

Ryoken realizes a bit too late that he’s been holding the knife in a defensive stand from the second the Ignis started to raise its voice. He blinks at Spectre, who just shrugs and gestures at the Ignis as if to say ‘*this is technically a kidnapping*’, so Ryoken just rolls his eyes and sighs.

“Look, there are several things going on that you wouldn’t understand—”

“You could try!”

“I am,” Ryoken snaps, which makes Spectre set a hand on his shoulder. He takes the cue, taking a deep breath to calm down and not lash out at the

Ignis. They really can't afford for it to escape. "It would be best for you and for a lot of people if you just came with us quietly. We are just going to keep you safe until it all blows over. We're even going to get the rest of your kin eventually—"

"Are the other partners working with you?" The Ignis interrupts, *again*, and Ryoken suddenly feels exhausted. He keeps his mouth shut, thinking about how to phrase this is a way that won't make it panic, but Spectre takes the task from him, looking very much done with the miscommunication.

"No, they aren't, but—"

"I don't trust him," the Ignis points at Ryoken, eyes narrowing, and he barely keeps himself from bristling in offense, taking a step forwards and being stopped only by Spectre's hand on his shoulder, trying to get him to calm down. His mind crackles with static again, and this time he flinches, a hand flying up to rest against his temple. The Ignis doesn't back down from its aggressive stance. "He's strange. I don't understand what was done to him, and I don't like this, this— intervention. This isn't how things are supposed to go."

Spectre takes his hand off Ryoken to rise both of them up as if to try to get the Ignis to calm down, his expression carefully calm, "I understand you're confused, but I promise we have no ill intentions towards you, and I recommend you go with us so I can explain things better—"

"And if I don't?"

Ryoken clenches his jaw, his grip on the dagger tightening until the leather of the handle makes a warning sound that it's about to break. He can't hurt the Ignis, much less murder it, especially since he doesn't know what could happen to Spectre if he did, but he can't let it get away. He's waited so long for this hunt to start, for the beginning of the end of this dull endless existence, for destiny to catch up to him finally— and he won't let it get messed up by one of them getting snatched from under his nose and another one refusing to cooperate.

He remembers now why he let Playmaker punch him.

“You have no choice,” his voice is sharp, rough, clearly strained with the effort to keep his temper down. The Ignis is so small he’s almost tempted to try and step on its legs to keep it from running away. That probably wouldn’t end well, though, so intimidation tactics were his only option here. “It’s us or Hanoi, and you don’t want to try your luck with them by yourself.”

“Hanoi? Isn’t that the name of the doctor’s project?” The Ignis’ eyes go wide, and then they’re narrowing down again, the on and off of static inside Ryoken’s brain going crazy. Spectre, to his side, presses a hand to his own temple, making dread pool on Ryoken’s stomach. The Ignis is letting emotion get the best of it and it’s resulting on an overload of feedback—he’s surprised that number six didn’t go through this, but at the same time he shouldn’t be. “Is the doctor after us?”

Number six is a variable in itself, an abnormality among its own kin, so who knows what it might be capable of if the psychic strain is this strong in this one. Ryoken can’t linger much on that thought, though. He has to deal with the Ignis at hand first.

“Forget the doctor,” Ryoken sets a hand on Spectre, trying not to lean on him for support. His ears are starting to ring, which is dangerous. It’s only a matter of time before the psychic energy gets picked up by the other experimentation subjects, and then by the radars. “Things have changed since you were all put in hibernation. The doctor is—”

“I’m leaving!” The Ignis glues itself to the cave’s walls again, hands splayed over it until it’s making an unconscious T-pose. Ryoken feels bitter anger mixed with panic rising in his throat like bile and struggles to swallow it down even as the cave starts to shake and the static inside his head grows louder, giving him an instantaneous headache that will probably linger for days. “Back off! I need to make sure the others are okay! Humans are not supposed to come looking for us!”

“If you could just—”

Ryoken gets interrupted by Spectre, who pushes him out of the way of the pieces of stone and dirt falling from the roof of the cave. It’s all shaking

now, the cliff they're standing on threatening to shatter and pull them to their probably deaths any second now. He knows the cave doesn't have much time left; its integrity is clearly diminishing with every passing second. It's a miracle it isn't already falling in on itself, but the speed of the destruction grows with the volume of the static in his brain. He's numb to most of it, an unfortunate side effect he's always had issues dealing with, but Spectre's hands on his shoulders are grounding and keep him still as the Ignis melts into the foil underneath their feet, effectively getting away. The shaking stops, leaving only the ringing in his brain and Spectre's voice trying to bring him back from a psychic overload.

"Ryoken-sama," Spectre calls, trying to get Ryoken to look at him, but his mind is fixated on the spot where the Ignis disappeared. He tries to look away, but all he can think about is how he failed again and what he'll have to do to make up for it later. Spectre's grip on his shoulders tightens until Ryoken is forced to make eye contact, and he knows with only that desperate, patient look that they can't give up just yet.

The shaking starts again, stronger than before, and Ryoken knows this is going to be picked up by just about everyone. He's going to be surprised if Hanoi isn't already climbing the mountain.

"We can't let it escape," he hears himself saying, watches Spectre nod firmly. "We need to go after it—"

"It's too dangerous for you in here, Ryoken-sama—"

Ryoken scoffs incredulously. "Since when can rocks hurt me?"

Spectre tolls his eyes. "We can't have you be buried here, can we? Starvation is, quite unfortunately, a viable way of killing you. So is lack of oxygen. Let me handle this. The Ignis will listen to me, but I don't think your face will be welcome."

Ryoken almost asks what's wrong with his face, but he doesn't have a chance because he's being turned around towards the way they came and pushed a couple of steps forwards. He turns around just in time to see Spectre create a wall of rocks between them with a sharp, quick gesture of

his hands, which is as much of a ‘fuck off’ as he will get right now. He tells himself Spectre will be alright, but as he retraces their path and comes back out to the surface there’s a restlessness that he can’t get rid of. It doesn’t take him long to realize the whole mountain is shaking and that the earthquake is spreading towards the city, which means the Ignis went down several levels into the ground.

He knows Spectre will be able to follow it and that he won’t be hurt, but anxiety fills his heart. He can’t just let him take the brunt of the fight; this was supposed to be a simple retrieval mission, not to be the cause of a disaster. The least he can do is get into town and make sure no lives are lost because of the earthquake; Den City is known for having a distinct lack of natural disasters, which means there isn’t really a set culture on how to handle them among the citizens.

With that objective in mind, Ryoken starts the walk down the mountain, his steps confident but for the rare stumbling thanks to the earthquake. It’s a soft one, even if it is encompassing the whole area of Den City, but that doesn’t make it any less dangerous. The longer it goes on, the more intense it gets, but at least the psychic strain isn’t quite as strong this far away from the Ignis.

There are short moments in which the earthquake stops for a few seconds before it continues; he can already imagine the headlines for the next morning, terrified reporters making the general public remember the events of old Domino that lead to the complete reconstruction of the city, but he can’t really linger on that thought— as soon as Ryoken gets back on the hiking path, he realizes that despite the fact that the sun has completely set and the night has taken over, the mountain is distinctly bright thanks to the light coming from several flashlights from below where he’s standing.

He stays still, muscles tensing, and lets himself be relieved by the fact that there were no incriminating identifiers of either him or Spectre on the van. He knows without a doubt that the only people that can be on the mountain apart from him and Spectre are Hanoi, because otherwise that would imply several civilians got unlucky. He would prefer that a million times over, but civilians would be screaming. The people climbing are talking quietly; if Ryoken pays attention he can tell they’re communicating through ear

pieces, and a terror so old and familiar makes his blood freeze over and his breath stop before he's taking quiet steps back, not the way he came but still too close to it.

Ryoken kneels, grabs a rock, and throws it with all his strength as far as he can from the entrance to the cave. He hears it land an almost impossibly long distance away, and all the flashlights turn towards it, people barking instructions before the earthquake starts again.

He makes sure they aren't paying attention in his direction before he's grabbing his guns and hiding them under bushes, all while he walks on the opposite direction that Hanoi are heading to. It's hard to do it while the earthquake goes on, but he managed and he absolutely *has* to do it. He doesn't have his mask with him and he can't be seen with fire arms—he does have a license to carry them, but that doesn't mean he can walk around with them.

He can't be seen by anyone. That would be too much of an obvious clue.

Ryoken's goal is to meet Hanoi on the other side of the mountain and keep distracting them to buy Spectre some time, but he has to admit he's trusting a bit too much on a pre-established rule. It might be a bit of an asshole move to hope the rule rings true, because he just wants it to have more bait for Hanoi to be busy with, but it's a *necessary* jackass wish.

After all, where Hanoi goes, Playmaker follows.

Notes for the Chapter:

tfw not even Spectre can support Ryoken's decisions.

5. recognition (part one)

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello, everyone that might have the patience to bear with me! I know, it's been like three months. I'm really sorry about that but I am a certified mess, alright? I struggle to write this AU a lot because I want it to be as perfect as humanly possible. No detail is too small for me, so I insist I am really sorry about the wait. You have no idea how much the fact that I hadn't updated haunted me. So, if any of you are willing to stand my mess... thank you for sticking around.

So, a few changes. I decided to make the chapters shorter from now on (aka I just sliced my usual chapter length in half) for both my convenience and your convenience. Why? Shorter means that if you don't remember, then you don't have to reread 10k words or so to continue. It also makes me feel less like a mess when I'm writing and it allows me to flesh out scenes I feel would be too short if I did 10k for one chapter. Get it? I hope you do.

I'll try to not disappear/ghost this fic for like three months again. Know that if I don't update in a while I'm either busy, having writer's block, or just writing ahead to make more updates possibly more often. I really really love this au, it's an unexpected baby, and so far I wouldn't change anything about it except my update schedule. As you can see, this is a part one chapter, and that's because this is kind of an "arc" in the story, because there will be at least three chapters, counting this one, coming out of this section. Lots of stuff happens in this mountain y'all.

Anyhow, I hope you enjoy. Thank you.

Hanoi brought a fucking excavator with them. Ryoken has absolutely no idea what they plan to do with this exactly, but it does make him uncomfortable and unreasonably angry because this is *not* an efficient way to work on stealing an overpowered alien being. He doesn't even know where they got this equipment from since he knows what kind of tools they

have in stock like the palm of his hand, so they probably stole it from somewhere, which doesn't make it any better. They are preparing to dig into the ground in between the earthquakes, at least two dozen minions moving around the area getting machines and all types of digging tools ready, most of them not having the faintest idea on how to use them properly.

Incompetence at its finest.

He's perched upon a tree because it's easier to follow their trail that way. The few members he came across earlier were clearly looking for something, but by the time Ryoken walked around the hiking path they had already retreated back to this very-hard-to-ignore camp area with an energy plant and portable lights and an actual *tents*. They seemed to be mostly for the equipment they were using, but there were people trickling in and out of the biggest one like they were receiving orders. There's clearly a leader in all of this, but whoever that is has not dared to step out yet. Ryoken feared the worst about their identity for more than a few minutes, crossing his fingers that it wasn't anyone that might have a personal vendetta against him – nevermind there's plenty of them that do – but either way, he needs to find a way to stop this or at least set back their work.

Despite the fact that he trusts Playmaker to show up, Ryoken should try to mess up some things anyway, if only out of principle. Spectre is smart enough to know not to contact him until he's back at the mansion, and even then Ryoken might not answer any call or even a message until he's sure Hanoi won't get too close to Ignis— to any of them, really. He's glad he didn't bring Miyu along after all, or it would have been disastrous.

Ryoken waits until two of the knights keeping watch in this little corner of the camp get distracted before he's grabbing one of them in a chokehold so strong that he feels their neck crack, then he knocks out the other one with a well-placed fist to their nose, blood covering his knuckles.

He shakes his head to himself in mild disappointment as he hides their bodies in the bushes; Hanoi may be growing in number, but the strength of their forces has been diminishing. This would have never happened under his command, which is all the proof he needs that they don't have a competent leader, or at least not one that cares about testing the ability of

new members before giving them a mask and putting them to work anymore. He wouldn't have allowed this infiltration to happen; measures would be put in place to guarantee that no detail escaped any of them *or else*—but it doesn't really matter anymore.

His days in charge are long over, after all, and right now he needs to focus on stealing the cloak out of one of them and hiding behind their mask to be able to mess up the digging equipment. He's barely halfway through suiting up when suddenly a whistle blows and a guy screams while running up to the main tent and parting the entrance, speaking up and sounding panicked.

“Playmaker is halfway up the mountain!”

Well, fuck, Ryoken thinks, shaking his head and hurriedly bringing the cloak down over his hair, *he couldn't wait five more minutes, could he?*

The news does send Hanoi's forces into a panic, though; suddenly everyone is running around taking orders and pulling out weapons, preparing for an assault as if they're going to war against one tired college student with superpowers. The lack of order is both hilarious and frustrating yet incredibly convenient, because he manages to steal the excavator's keys, break a few shovels and mess up a few diggers, then to retreat back to his hiding place without alerting anyone. Seeing as they'll be pretty busy with the sleep-deprived menace, Ryoken starts making his way back to the cave entrance—only to realize there are more Hanoi members hiking up the mountain and he's essentially surrounded.

He climbs a tree again. It's certainly not the most dignified response, but he can't be seen by anyone or that would be the end of several years of work and planning behind the scenes and paying shady sources and ignoring phone calls and text messages from the one family member that cares about him, not to mention the end of his life but—well, even if that happens there's going to be Spectre and Playmaker around, though he would rather do what he has been planning to do himself instead of letting it to others.

So, Ryoken watches in silence how chaos keeps breeding among their ranks, but with every minute that passes, he gets more and more concerned about Spectre's progress. Their less than ideal approach to the situation

guaranteed that the Ignis would not be friendly and accept a nice talk with Spectre over metaphorical tea; if that was the case, Ryoken wouldn't be sitting on a tree and holding on to it for dear life to avoid falling off with every shake that rattles the ground. He just had to go and open his damn mouth and screw up everything, didn't he?

This wouldn't be so hard if Hanoi wasn't getting its hands all over this business again like they have any right. He had foolishly hoped that they would lose interest in the Ignis thanks to the new developments they've made since with their mutant formulas and their viruses, but that's clearly not the case at all. Instead, they seem to be all too eager to recover what they think it's theirs but will never obtain if Ryoken gets his way.

Ryoken keeps an ear hour for any sounds of people approaching his hiding place, and takes a look downwards when he notices quick light footsteps and then a following rustling, a hushed voice mumbling '*now*', and he barely has time to brace himself before the ground below him is suddenly shaking with the impact of a grenade.

Yusaku is not a big fan of stealing. He's done it before and would do it again, but only in extreme circumstances; he just doesn't like to take stuff people worked hard to get from them. Yet he barely hesitates before stopping a civilian by standing in the middle of the road to take his bike and drive it right into a huge shadow, Soulburner gleefully screaming behind him and holding onto him for dear life as he slammed the gas.

As always, Playmaker was quick to respond to danger once he figured out that there was nothing natural about the earthquakes in the city. It was quite obvious, really, but this could easily be misinterpreted by everyone. After the initial shockwave, Ai turned back to his original form and held onto him with worried eyes, claiming there was something wrong, and they all could feel tell it was true in their guts, something in the back of their minds *pulling* like he's never felt before.

Jin was the most affected out of the four of them, refusing to stand up from under the table he hid under when the earthquake started. Shoichi arrived just in time to take care of him and get him somewhere safe, probably to a

safe room downtown, so Soulburner and Playmaker are alone in this, with no backup because Blue Angel is most certainly going to get called for civilian rescue, and Onizuka is probably already on his way to do the same.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out Hanoi is involved. Only they have the means to cause such wreck without anyone noticing it beforehand, but Yusaku is admittedly a bit confused—two attacks on the same day isn't how they usually operate. Hanoi prefers to bring all guns out in symphony in hopes of overwhelming any opposition to their attempts to experiment on the whole city population or just cause general chaos and disarray they could benefit from, so this felt like an odd move from their part, like they didn't even realize what they were doing.

Soulburner even points this out as they ride there, the earthquakes barely making their path any less smooth than it normally would be thanks to Playmaker making the most out of his abilities and the quickly approaching night time. He can tell it's a bit dizzyingly for Soulburner after the fourth massive jump, and even he's starting to get queasy at how fast they're moving, but it's their only way to travel without being unfashionably late to the party. He's still tremendously exhausted from this morning, which is another point in his favor for his conjecture that there might be something other than Hanoi at play.

Something like the Ignis.

He still hasn't been able to properly sit down and process the day, but it feels like it's been months already since he found Ai instead of just a few hours. Things suddenly seem to be moving simultaneously way too fast and way too slow, time becoming a simple illusion as he keeps taking in new information, and he can't decide which one he dislikes the most. All he knows is that he needs to get to the mountain, figure out what's happening, and deal with it as soon as possible, which is honestly his usual way of dealing with most unexpected twists.

When he lands on the hiking path, the impact of the bike against the ground making them bounce on the seat, but a quick look around tells them they're alone, and they stand up with the objective of looking around more closely. There's no noticeable change to the immediate environment of it from what

he can tell at first sight, if counting out the obvious evidence that there was a car here not that long ago, maybe several.

Playmaker shoots a look at Soulburner and decides that they should split up, pointing towards the wheel tracks over the hiking path and the fresh footprints.

“We’re late to the party,” Playmaker says, then squints up the trees to his left. To his right, there’s only the cliff-side and a view of the ocean in which sometimes Stardust Road appears, and the place would appear deserted to anyone that didn’t have senses quite as sharp as them. Soulburner turns towards the end of the hiking path, humming in agreement. “It’s probably Hanoi, despite this not being their MO. Split?”

“I go up the path, you go through the trees?” Soulburner asks, already taking a few steps forwards up the path. “I can see a parked van up there. Looks suspicious.”

Playmaker opens his mouth to agree, but Ai beats him to it by slapping one of his tiny hands on his shoulder. “Hey, Playmaker, do you hear that?”

Playmaker pauses, tilts his head, and then gets interrupted by the mountain shaking. Soulburner trips but otherwise stands his ground, while Playmaker downright kneels to avoid the inconvenience. In here, the shaking feels even stronger, like it’s coming from the very core of the mountain, which means this is indeed the place of origin of the earthquakes as if that wasn’t already obvious. He can’t even begin to imagine the collapses the earthquakes will cause if every single one of them keeps rebounding like they are right now. Playmaker exchanges a grim look with Soulburner once it’s over, feeling a little bit like he’s been shaking himself, his limbs tingling from having been so close to the ground and holding onto it to not lose his balance, as well from the pulling feeling in his gut. Not for the first time today, Playmaker feels like finding Ai quick-started something bigger than he was expecting.

“This will complicate things,” Playmaker licks his lips, frowning, and meets Soulburner’s eyes, his mind working a mile a minute. “We’ll stick with your plan. It’s dangerous for you to be in a forest area anyways.”

"If you need help, I'll come running," Soulburner pats his shoulder, giving him a thumbs-up, and turns to run up the hiking path, leaving Playmaker alone with Ai with little more than a wave and a finger tapping against his ear, where his earpiece is. "Good luck!"

Once he's gone, Playmaker turns his attention back to Ai.

"What is it that you're hearing?" He asks, turning his head towards his right shoulder, where the Ignis is comfortably sitting down, legs crossed. His head is tilted, and he's looking strangely serious, like he also has a bad feeling about this. He was quiet during the ride here, so Playmaker wouldn't be surprised if there were things at work that his senses could not discern.

"Just listen closely," Ai presses a hand against his cheek, the texture still foreign, and the touch sends a shiver down Playmaker's spine. "Here, a sneak peek. Don't ever say I'm not helpful!"

Then his hearing seemingly seems to disappear, becoming a big void of nothing for a few alarming seconds— and suddenly there are voices and footsteps, so close Playmaker instinctively turns in their direction, nerves alert. He hears machinery, the sounds of the earth being moved with equipment, as well as really quiet, almost inaudible echoes of hushed, harsh voices, probably from whoever is in charge today.

Then Ai takes his hand off his face and his sense of hearing comes back as it is, above average but definitely lacking the wide range Ai apparently has. He feels the need to blink like it was his sight that was interfered with, but a few seconds later Playmaker feels ready to continue. He's not even going to question what just happened; aliens are aliens and they supposedly have a connection of sorts, so things like this are plausible. He's got no time to worry about it anyways.

He grabs the bike and sits on the seat, turning the engine back up. "It is Hanoi."

Ai hums in agreement, "So now what?"

Playmaker pauses, runs a hand through his hair and then shrugs. “We’re gonna punch all of them until we find the one in charge, maybe get more details on the way. Onizuka managed to catch the originators from this morning’s attack, but either they lost it or that was just a screen to set up whatever they want to do right now. They’re digging.”

“Oh! Can I help? Don’t get me wrong, humans look like they taste nasty, but—”

“No, you’re going to be quiet,” Playmaker slowly rides the bike down the hiking path, looking for a good spot to slam the pedal from so he can get a good impulse up the trees. There’s no way he’s going to be able to give this vehicle back after all he’s going to put it through. “Revolver said Hanoi is after you too, which means they won’t aim to kill but to capture. They’ll surely want me, too, but at least I already know what I’m dealing with. You only come out if I say so.”

“Party bummer,” Ai mumbles, and then Playmaker stops, slams the gas, and successfully manages enough momentum to drive over the borders of the hiking path and make his way up without much of a hassle. It’s rocky in some places, too soft in others, but the roughness of the trip barely makes him pause. He’s had worse, but clearly Ai hasn’t. “Holy— warn me next time, would you!?”

“That takes the fun out of it,” Playmaker shrugs, his voice a bit louder over the sound of the bike. “Guide me towards Hanoi. There’s no need to play it coy right now!”

Ai mumbles something Playmaker doesn’t catch, and directs him through the woods with accuracy that could only come from something not-human. Eventually, he finds traces of their presence scattered over the foil of the ground; it’s hard to hide car wheels marks, and they don’t even bother with it. The earthquake makes it hard for him to rise with the bike, so he eventually dumps it and starts running, using the shadows only to make his way easier but not to go faster. He doesn’t care about Hanoi knowing he’s after them; in fact, Playmaker wants them to feel nervous, to be hyper-aware of the fact that they have a vengeful spirit after them that won’t go

away until every single one of them is either where they belong in a cell or six feet under.

Playmaker doesn't kill, but he likes to break. It's one irreversible thing about him; no matter how much he holds back, memories of his time as a subject and the suffering Hanoi has caused make him lash out. He's past caring about breaking a few bones— it's better that way, even, almost therapeutic. Not the best way of coping, but it's one of the only things that has worked for him to get all that bottled up fury out. They will heal, eventually. Yusaku can't, not until he's able to put the pieces together.

And he's so close, it almost tastes of oblivion.

At his first glance of people, Playmaker picks up the pace, his footsteps loud against the ground. Once he's close enough to distinguish the classical Hanoi uniforms, he uses all his running impulse to jump right into a shadow, coming out of the ground right in front of his targets, making them all scramble backward out of surprise. One of them trips over a fallen tree branch and falls, so Playmaker grabs him, pulling him up and punching him in the throat.

He hears him choke and watches him spit out blood all over his chin, something clearly broken thanks to the force that he just exerted on him. He turns towards the other five around him who all still scrambling to pull their guns out or to process the situation, so Playmaker tightens his grip on the minion he's holding and throws him towards two of them with all his strength, making them roll a few meters down the mountain. He turns towards the three that are left, who are taking slow steps backward, and notices that one of them is talking into the communication device in their mask, so he decides to take care of them last. He would hate to miss a chance to talk to the people in charge himself.

Playmaker starts running towards them despite having weapons pointed at him, falls neatly into the shadow of a tree and comes up behind them. Instead of jumping out to grab them though, Playmaker grabs the feet of both of his targets and pulls them in to throw them off balance until the darkness is all but swallowing them as well. They panic, of course, new to the feeling, so Playmaker uses his advantage in knowledge to knock their

heads together. They both go limp, most likely with strong concussions, so Playmaker makes sure to send them somewhere where they won't get in the way, deep into the forest.

He faces his last target then, and he can tell now that it's a woman, his hands raising up in defense when she points her gun right at him, no hesitation or nervousness to her posture at all. The sun is all but down now, so he has a clear advantage, but she seems to have decided to ignore that—or maybe she's just that confident. Either way, it's stupid and exactly what he would expect from a minion like her.

"I just need your earpiece," Playmaker speaks up, not a trace of exhaustion in his voice despite having taken down four knights in barely a couple minutes. Years ago, they used to be a challenge—he isn't sure if he's only gotten stronger or they have gotten lazier. This particular Knight of Hanoi just tightens her grip on the gun, no signs whatsoever of having another plan. "If you give me the earpiece I'll let you get out of this mountain without any broken bones—I'll even spare your nose."

"I don't care about that," she spits out—literally. It lands a couple of steps in front of him. There's nothing remarkable about her, which applies to every single member of the organization, and not for the first time Playmaker wonders how many of their members are just in it for the trip that doing something bad offers them. "Hanoi is my life now, and I've never been better. They have accepted me as one of their own and helped me grow into someone stronger, more confident, and ready to take all that I want—"

Playmaker really doesn't enjoy this part of the job. Sometimes, his enemies like to go on rants about just how good being bad felt, and he almost always spaces out during them, or plays a bingo game in his brain. This woman is clearly going for an '*I will make my leaders proud so I can show my gratitude for how being evil improved my tendency to be a psycho*' approach, which is always underwhelming. Do these they never aspire to go up the ranks? Or just become villains on their own? Does Hanoi offer a salary? Do they all just join bioterrorism because it's free and taboo and help them feel better about having a dark double life?

He lets her talk for thirty counted seconds, and then he runs towards her and ducks, easily predicting the trajectory of the bullet thanks to how distracted she was talking about how *much* she looks up to their superior in charge tonight, a comment that only makes him more curious about what exactly they're doing if there's someone worthwhile on the field today. Over the last couple of years, Hanoi's higher-ups have all but vanished—some in jail, some running away, some probably killed inside the organization itself, some hiding. This morning there were just minions running around free to break havoc, and only a couple of them were actually supervising for the sake of actually gathering their testing data.

It makes him as nervous as it makes the adrenaline pump quicker through his veins.

Yusaku jabs his elbow into her stomach from his crouched position, takes advantage of the momentum and her shock to straighten up and punch her jaw, and then lays her down gently on the ground when she immediately passes out. He might not have much strength, compared to, say, Revolver or Go, but he's still above human limitations. It's actually hard to hold back sometimes, when he's had a long day and Hanoi is taunting him and firing up his anger in ways that aren't new but rarely fail to drive him crazy. Tonight is especially jarring, with all this surprise change in behavior and the whole Ai situation.

Shaking his head, Playmaker takes her earpiece from her mask, untangling the wiring, and slots it neatly into his own ear after taking his own out, covering the microphone and thinking about what he's going to say.

"Ew," Ai's head peeks out of his wrist, frowning up at him. "You aren't even going to clean that? It was in her ear."

Playmaker rolls his eyes and stands up, listening to the things going on over the earpiece. There's a male voice asking for confirmation on backup, so Playmaker clears his throat and then brings the mic up to his mouth.

"This is Playmaker talking," he starts, and isn't surprised when everything suddenly goes quiet. He continues after a beat. "I want to know who's in

charge tonight and what you're all doing here. I think it would save us all some time if we spoke about it calmly.”

There are a few seconds of silence in which he thinks no one is going to answer, but then someone clears their throat, there's some rustling, and a voice he thought he would never hear again after so much time speaks up, as cold and confident as ever.

“This is Dr. Taki, Playmaker,” she says, almost nonchalant as if her sudden presence here, in Den City, on the same mountain he's at right now isn't a discovery on its own, an absolute highlight and simultaneously the worst thing that could have happened tonight. “I must say, it's nice to finally meet you again.”

Blinking, Playmaker looks around him, his jaw clenching and unclenching as a thousand words and questions go all over his head, all on the tip of his tongue. “I thought you were on retirement out of the country, doctor. Didn't expect to ever see you again.”

Dr. Taki laughs as if they're old friends, and something inside Playmaker twists, dark and angry and vicious making him struggle to not close his fist around the mic. “Well, I would call it more of a vacation. They weren't any fun, though. There are much more interesting things going on here tonight.”

“I didn't expect someone of your jurisdiction to be here tonight,” Playmaker bites the inside of his cheek and stares at Ai for a few seconds, his mind already coming up with several bad reasons for her to be here. Viruses somehow related to the Ignis come to mind, but that's just one of many crazy theories. “This must be important.”

“As you can imagine, Playmaker” Dr. Taki answers, not missing a beat. Not being able to stay still anymore, Playmaker stands up and starts walking up the mountain again, keeping his footsteps as light and quiet as possible. “We can't afford our actions here to find themselves compromised by you. It would be best for everyone if you left.”

“That's what you always say,” Playmaker points out, sighing. “I'm not one of your helpless test subjects anymore, doctor. You can't exactly keep trying

to tell me what to do.”

“You make it difficult to negotiate.”

At that, Playmaker pauses and actually snorts out loud at the ridiculous notion that he should be doing any kind of negotiation with the Knights of Hanoi, or with one of the individuals that he all but *knows* was somehow involved with his abduction and torture. “You know I’ll find you. Perhaps today I’ll put you back in jail, after so many years traveling the world.”

“But will you keep me in this time?”

A hot rush of blind fury runs through his veins at the memory of Taki Kyoko’s aided escape from prison only three months into her sentence, already six years ago. It made him want to tear his hair out then and it still does now; there’s been absolutely no change in how he feels about scum like her. He knows for a fact she has a soft side—but no matter how many times she pretty much turns herself in, it’s never going to erase what she did.

“You better be well prepared, then,” Playmaker doesn’t hide the anger in his voice, wanting her to know he has no intention of leaving this place without her in tow. He takes off the earpiece immediately after he’s done talking, not wanting to hear her response, drops it to the ground and steps on it as viciously as he can.

Immediately afterward, Playmaker takes a deep breath and taps his earpiece, static blaring for a second before Soulburner’s voice takes over, still not clear.

“Taki is here,” are his opening words, and Soulburner makes a small choked off sound over the line. “Keep your eyes and ears open. We’re taking her with us tonight.”

“Playmaker, are you sure it’s her? There have been copycats—”

“It’s her,” Playmaker interrupts, and starts to walk up the mountain again, picking up his pace as he goes. “I talked to her. Unless they have an

amazing imitator with them, there's no other explanation.”

“Alright,” Soulburner sighs, and Playmaker can tell that’s he’s deeply regretting not staying in town for civilian relief. “We’re leaving with a big fish tonight then. I haven’t found anything, but I hear a camp a bit ahead—I’ll notify you if I need anything.”

“I’ll keep the communication open,” Playmaker leaves it at that, nodding to himself at Soulburner’s hum of agreement. It’s not a thing they do often, but it seems necessary this time around. With someone like Taki on the case, anything could happen at any time.

He’s allowed peace for only a few minutes after that in which an earthquake almost manages to bring him down to his knees – they seem to be slowing down; he has no idea if that’s good – but then Ai reminds him he’s not going to have the luxury to be alone for a long, long while. “Playmaker-sama, you’re so mysterious.”

“I’m not,” he raises an eyebrow at the trees around him, not dignifying Ai with a look and picking up his pace, tilting his head to be able to hear any possible incoming company. He’s now in hyper-vigilance, but there’s something that sits wrong in his gut, a hunch that he’s missing something. He can barely focus over the earthquakes, the revelations, his exhaustion, and that awful humming, so he’s surprised he’s still in one piece. “I’m nothing compared to Revolver.”

“Uh, you do talk about him a lot. Jin-chan was not exaggerating one bit—”

“He insists on making everything too difficult, alright?” Playmaker frowns and then shakes his head. Ai actually snickers at his obvious deflect, but he feels no shame again. “I don’t want to talk about that. Keep a lookout, there’s something—”

Someone throws a bomb at him.

He hears and watches it land barely a meter in front of him and has enough time to leap into a shadow and fall into the ground just enough distance away to not die or get injured beyond scratches and a couple of cuts. It was

a small bomb, with small range, but loud and just as dangerous as a real one if you let it caught you.

It doesn't take a genius to assume he's surrounded. A quick look around confirms there's only three of them, approaching with bombs in hand—but then another earthquake interrupts and Playmaker decides that he doesn't want to deal with those bombs unless he's using them himself, so he takes advantage of the situation and tackles every single Hanoi minion faster than they can process it, wrestling the bombs out their hands. It's not a good technique, because those could have blown up in his face, but nothing an earthquake, a broken arm and a knee on their backs couldn't solve.

With that out of the way, Playmaker gets pointed by one of them to their camp location through some effective convincing: finger breaking. He doesn't think that knight will ever be quite the same after having Playmaker sitting on their back shattering their fingers almost beyond repair, but it's what this job demands. Years ago, the sound of bones cracking used to freak him out, but he's practically numb to it now. It helps that he's dealing with terrorists and vile humans most of the time.

Logically, their camp already knows he's coming, but at least he has some bombs on his possession now, that he all but shoves inside one of the weird bottomless pockets of his suit's belt that he can't explain and doesn't think too hard about. He's more than halfway up the mountain and he can already hear them on his own; Playmaker decides that sneaking in is for the best, because Dr. Taki being here changes pretty much everything, so he needs to observe and—

Hanoi is, of course, prepared, but he was certainly not expecting to hear them dig into the mountain, and it dawns on him that he might need the back up *now*. He brings a hand up to tap his earpiece to find it gone, probably because of the fall he took avoiding the bomb, and looks around the chaos of their numbers carrying tools and weapons around as if they're preparing for war. Night has fallen over all of them completely, so it's only a matter of time before Soulburner becomes noticeable anyways. Hopefully, they'll find each other before something terrible happens. Soulburner does have a thing for being late.

Another earthquake makes the sounds of digging stop, and Playmaker has to wonder what's so important that they're doing this in these conditions. It's possible that they planted some kind of cluster in the mountain and they want to help it out, but the more he thinks about their behavior, the more he believes that this is somehow connected to the Ignis. He can feel it in his gut, though perhaps more accurately there's something nagging him in the back of his mind—literally. How much of a coincidence can it be that Hanoi organizes two attacks the same day he accidentally gets involved with Ai and finds some leverage against Revolver?

So, with a sigh, Playmaker picks up the pace and literally runs into the first Hanoi thug he sets his eyes on, swinging his leg and spinning his body to kick them in the face. The camp was already in disarray before his arrival; Hanoi had no doubt a change in leadership about five, maybe six years ago, and since then it hasn't been quite the same when it comes to manpower. Quantity is never better than quality when your objective is to take over society via virus engineering.

Five thugs close in on him and Playmaker clenches his fists, his eyes set not on them but rather on his objective.

Dr. Taki is watching from the entrance of her tent, her lips pulled into a tense line while her second-in-command for the day barks orders that everyone else struggles to follow. They make eye contact, despite the chaos, and Playmaker's eyes narrow.

He's ready.

She retreats back inside her tent just as Playmaker throws himself into the fray, trying to make quick work of her lackeys to catch her before she escapes. It's not easy because it's a lot of them, and the occasional tremble of the ground make him more unsteady than he ever is, but it's not overly complicated. When someone approaches him from behind, he uses the body he has on the front as a shield by grabbing them, spinning and pushing them towards the attacker, making the most out of his limited resources. Using a bomb in close range would not be fun.

He's not one to shadow-travel away in really close quarters either. It's too unpredictable in those cases unless he has some sort of backup, but Soulburner has not given any signals of even being in his immediate surroundings, probably having found something or dealing with whatever he found around his side of the mountain.

He makes his way to Dr. Taki's tent steady but too slow, and it worries him, because he doesn't want her to run away. He never understood why she would break out of jail after she all but made it look six years ago like she was done with this lifestyle, and it seemed somewhat sketchy that she was suddenly back on the field after so much time.

He doesn't get to think about it too deeply, though—a gunshot rings out from inside the tent, followed by another two in quick succession, and for a second Playmaker fears that Dr. Taki has decided that she wouldn't be caught at all, nor would she escape this time, so he hurries his pace, breezes through the remaining knights by allowing himself to punch harder and move faster, barely noticing the crunch of bones breaking under his touch in his hurry to get to the tent, but he is not prepared for the sight that greets him.

Dr. Taki is there, alright, on her feet and without a hair out of place, pointing a gun at the kneeling, wide-eyed and clearly panicked figure of Kogami Ryoken.

Notes for the Chapter:

was it worth three months? probably not but thank you for reading anyways!!!! please don't be afraid to leave a comment about this and tell me what you think of the story so far. i know that there's more than a few... curious bits lol.

6. recognition (part two)

Notes for the Chapter:

Behold! An update! Probably shorter than it should have been, but certainly hope you enjoy. There's a lot to come for the next one. Thanks for reading and sticking around! I'd love to hear what you think of the story so far and if you have any questions, so don't be afraid to leave a comment.

Spectre doesn't want to be insensitive, but Ryoken could be a downright idiot at times.

He more than anyone else knows how his brain works and how deep his feelings are buried in the dark depths of his being, underneath all the things he feels responsible and guilty about and having a lower priority than it should in between all the literal *noise* in his head, but it is frankly annoying when Ryoken's inability to explain himself gets in the way of their own plans. There's also the fact that fifty-percent of the time he ignores his very useful advice; perhaps the Ignis wouldn't have felt half as threatened if they had left that dagger behind like he suggested.

He can obviously admit that being raised in a human experimentation lab where your father poked you at you with all kinds of medical equipment every day probably ruined Ryoken's... everything, on both a physical and emotional level, and that he's not one to talk much about or even judge his decisions when he isn't exactly the sharpest tool when it comes to handling other people's feelings— but common sense is something that he, thankfully, hasn't lost, but that Ryoken seems to throw out of the window every time things go south in a way they weren't expecting. Spectre can hardly blame him because when their plans are ruined things usually go wrong big time no matter what they do to stop it, and he knows that Ryoken is in general extremely cool-headed, but he just gets really fed up with it sometimes. Especially when it comes to Playmaker, that wretched minx that makes Ryoken's brain melt with just a look.

Still, he understands the complications that plague his mind and would never dare to complain about them in a way that wasn't meant to make him feel somewhat more balanced, but it's hard to keep this positive attitude about it when he's walking under a mountain looking for a rogue Ignis that's most definitely causing earthquakes, no doubt as a side effect of both its overwhelming feelings and its raw power. Spectre can't wait to watch the news tomorrow morning; that's meant to be hilarious if he survives tonight.

Another tremor goes through the ground and up towards the surface, and he feels the vibrations all through his body, making him stop for a few seconds before continuing on downwards, following the remnants of that little whisper in the back of his mind. There's a limit to how far down he can go before he starts getting short on oxygen or his body gives in to the pressure of the earth he's bending, but he's not that far off his goal. He just needs to find a way to get to the Ignis without it escaping at the sight of him, and then try to convince it to calm down and listen to him. He's afraid the only way to gather some attention and tentative trust might be through real, actual honesty and not his attempts at psychological manipulation he usually goes with, but it's a sacrifice he's willing to make. Ryoken does ask him if he needs a listening in for his own issues sometimes, but Spectre would just rather it not be him after everything he's done to keep him out of harm's way.

Spectre's been paying back the freedom he has now for a few years now and doesn't think he'll ever feel like he's given Ryoken as much as he gave him, but he's going to try his best to be there for him when he needs him and take some of the weight of the world off his back.

He just hopes he isn't having much trouble on the surface.

Ryoken has decided that trees suck, despite how he has an immense amount of respect for them thanks to Spectre. This one, in particular, is the worst tree he's come in contact with in his life, because it fell on top of him and dug its bark into his face. He could barely feel it and it didn't hurt, but it was like his skin was being tickled with sandpaper. Not fun and certainly not an experience he would like to repeat.

They were still useful, though. The branches and leaves kept him hidden from Playmaker's view, and he managed to not make a sound when the bombs exploded and made the tree he was perched on top of fall down, taking him with him. His shirt is ripped, which will raise many questions from— well, anyone, but he'd rather explain it to a stranger than to Playmaker. The lack of any marks on his skin will surely be something to be questioned about if he allows himself to be looked at.

Perhaps he should be angry at him instead of the tree for not noticing the fact that they were surrounded, but he doesn't have the motivation or energy to focus on that right now, or rather, to add it to the list. He's still angry at him for the events of this morning regarding the Ignis, and then strangely disappointed because of his rejection in class, so the last thing he wants is to add '*he made a tree fall on top of me*' to the list. That statement would be wrong anyways— Hanoi was responsible for the bombs, after all, but Ryoken is just feeling petty.

Hearing Playmaker torture a guy is somewhat entertaining, though, even if he doesn't get to see it. He'd like to think he inspired some of his techniques, but he knows better than anyone that Playmaker could be absolutely ruthless if not downright coldhearted and cruel at times without supervision.

It's part of what he likes about him. The bodysuit *certainly* helps.

Playmaker is off and Ryoken is able to push the tree off him, careful not to make any noise. He has no doubt he can handle taking the camp by himself, but Ryoken will make sure to keep an eye on him—if Dr. Taki is around, then she will want to have all of her fighting forces focused on him while other camps around the mountain keep digging or come to the rescue. His work on the equipment will only set them back for so long, and he needs to make sure Spectre gets out safely as his main priority.

Ryoken walks in the opposite direction Playmaker headed to, but a hand clutching his leg stops him from getting too far away. He looks down to see one of the Hanoi cronies staring at him through a broken gap in their mask, the visible eye narrowed. Ryoken doesn't have to be an expert to know they have recognized him, so it is with little hesitation that he frees his foot from

their grasp and presses it against their throat, hard, until they choking because of the lack of oxygen.

Ryoken makes sure there's no rise and fall or any lingering struggling from them before lifting his foot, confident in that they're dead. It's not his favorite or fastest killing method, but it anything else would appear even more suspicious when the police and paramedics arrived for search and rescue or just plain arresting. He walks over to one of the other minions laying around, finds them all unconscious and bleeding, so Ryoken grabs some of the blood and smears it over his shirt and stomach in an attempt to cover up his lack of wounds, just in case. He would ditch the shirt and just infiltrate again with a Hanoi suit, but he can't be bothered.

He stops afterward, rethinking his strategy. It's highly likely that Dr. Taki is the one in the camp Playmaker is attacking right now, and while she was no military leader or anything of the like, she was at least more competent than many of the new disposables that had been put on command of their forces. He wasn't worried about how Playmaker would fare against them, but Kyoko...

Ryoken goes back to the body of the guy he choked and takes his gun. He almost wants to be upset that he had to dump his own only to grab these, but his choice in firearms was far more specific than those Hanoi gave out for their lackeys to use. It would be suspicious otherwise, if he was found and claimed to be defending himself, the fact that he has a permit to carry guns notwithstanding.

Ryoken walks around the perimeter of the campsite, taking advantage of the fact that everyone's attention is on Playmaker to sneak into one of the tents and watch out for any chance to get into the main one without being noticed. He gets momentarily distracted by observing Playmaker fight; he's agile and quick, flexible, but can take on people twice his size without breaking a sweat. There's something highly hypnotizing about the way he moves, fluidly and with a certain grace that reminds Ryoken of a dancer, or perhaps more accurately, a wild cat like a panther—he's danger hidden in a small, unsuspecting package, but Ryoken's mind concerns itself with the sight for only a few seconds.

He watches Playmaker judo-flip a man that must be the same height as Onizuka Go and then focuses his eyes on his target, watching how Kyoko retreats back inside her tent with apparent calmness. Ryoken, of course, knows better—she must be nervous about the idea of being caught and failing again, though not by the police, and the almost unnoticeable crease of her eyebrows confirms it.

There are worse things than jail in this life, and they both are aware of it.

He quickly realizes that going unnoticed will probably be a bigger issue than he anticipated, so Ryoken turns back to the perimeter and walks around, searching for a perfect angle to sneak in from. By the time he finds a blind spot, Playmaker has seriously reduced the number of Hanoi knights in fighting conditions, so Ryoken ducks his head and dashes inside the tent, taking in the opportunity when he sees Playmaker being assaulted from behind.

There are three guns pointed at him the second he steps in, all of the Knights of Hanoi that were inside reacting quicker than he expected from their decrease in quality, but he reciprocates just as fast by pointing his gun directly at Kyoko.

They were picking up everything, from the looks of it. Folders are around the table, papers half-heartedly shoved inside them. The board they were no doubt using to pin information lays face down on the floor, and the map of the mountain they were using is very nearly hitting the floor. He sees the points marked on it, no doubt places to dig, and clenches his jaw at how close they were to the actual location of the Ignis while simultaneously missing it.

Ryoken meets Kyoko's eyes, but this time his hand doesn't shake when he takes the safety off the gun like it did all those years ago.

"Ryoken," she says, her voice carefully controlled, but her eyes dart around to the other three people standing around them, lingering at the guns. She's nervous. "This is quite the surprise."

“I could say the same to you,” Ryoken allows his voice to become harsh and cold, and spies out of the corner of his eye the way one of what he can only assume are Kyoko’s assistants fidgets in confusion, clearly recognizing his tone as that of their former leader. When Ryoken meets her eyes again, she raises one eyebrow. “I thought you were laying low after jail.”

“Some things require my hands-on approach,” she looks around the room again and sighs, then raises up one hand. There’s hesitation before her companions put down their guns, and after that they immediately go about picking up whatever is left to clean up for a quick getaway. Ryoken keeps his out. “We agreed that this wouldn’t happen, Ryoken. We agreed you would forget..”

“We did that, what, six years ago? Things have changed, and forgetting is not easy,” Ryoken tilts his head towards the map, unimpressed. “Seriously?”

Kyoko waves her hand, shrugging it off, and then gets her own gun out of her belt and shoots one of her assistants in the head. The other two turn around in panic, but they only meet Ryoken’s bullets between their eyes. They’re down immediately, and the sounds of the fighting outside stops before it picks up again, this time with more screaming. Playmaker clearly heard what went on, so Ryoken kneels on the ground, throws his gun towards one of the dead assistants, and raises his hands up while Kyoko points her gun at him.

“You’ll be safer in jail,” Ryoken tells her, his voice barely above a whisper. “No one can touch you there.”

“You assume I will make it there alive a second time, as if the first wasn’t a miracle,” she pauses, her expression becoming softer, and Ryoken keeps the eye contact even though he doesn’t want to, because he knows what she’ll say. “You should have stayed with your cousin, Ryoken.”

Ryoken takes a deep breath and shakes his head, not dignifying the words with an answer. She opens her mouth, probably to try and make him explain to her what he thinks he’s doing, but then Playmaker bargains into the tent and makes her freeze, her grip on the gun pointing at him more steady.

Ryoken doesn't look at Playmaker, but he feels his eyes on him, already burning with confusion and suspicions. He does his best to look at least mildly threatened by the gun, and he doesn't have to pretend much—he pictures a white room, a similar situation, and terror creeps on its own, growing inside him to a point. He allows for it to show on his face, shivers going through his body and goosebumps rising on his skin. He feels nauseous as he stares at the barrel of the gun, but simultaneously distances himself from the situation to keep his mind calm.

His body enters in shock, completely frozen on the spot, but his mind remains quiet—too quiet, perhaps, but it allows him to take in the situation to process it later.

"Dr. Taki," Playmaker speaks up, and Ryoken risks a glance to see him raising a hand towards Kyoko and eyeing Ryoken like he can't believe what he's seeing. He meets his eyes and swallows, pretending to be more nervous than he is even with that small amount of self-induced fear and adrenaline rushing through his veins. "He's a civilian. He's not involved."

Kyoko grins at him sardonically, knowing very well that he is, in fact, a lion in sheep's clothes.

"You know who he is, right?" she asks, her tone perfectly pleasant. She doesn't give away a drop of hesitation, playing into her role as a villain. "You must. I thought you'd want him dead."

Ryoken's eyes glance up to meet hers. "Rude."

Kyoko takes a step forward and presses the gun against his forehead, the cool metal making him shiver. When she talks it's stern, closer to a warning than a simple order, and Ryoken almost regrets doing this on purpose. "Quiet."

Ryoken glares at her, but Playmaker interrupts like he thinks he will try to provoke her. He would, if the feeling of having a gun against his skin wasn't threatening to make him hyperventilate.

“There’s nothing on him, Dr. Taki. Let him go,” Playmaker’s eyes drift towards the dead bodies and his eyes widen almost unnoticed, his entire demeanor changing, his voice harsher. “You’ve done enough.”

Kyoko pretends to think about it and then looks down at Ryoken, meeting his eyes.

“How much do you care?” She asks, her eyes narrowing, but she doesn’t look away from Ryoken for one second. It’s clear, by the almost imperceptible wrinkles of worry and fear around her mouth and eyes, that she’s asking something far deeper than whether Playmaker cares or not about saving civilian lives. It feels like she’s asking Ryoken the same thing, in fact, which is a heart-shaking thought in and of itself.

Playmaker takes a measured step forward, bringing his hands up when Kyoko presses the gun more insistently against Ryoken’s skin and making actual fear spike inside him at the idea that she might actually shoot. It’s brief and immediately going away to be dealt with later by himself, thanks to the slight shake in Kyoko’s hand that anyone else might attribute to the danger of being this close to being arrested but that he knows comes from deeper worries.

“Does it matter?” Playmaker speaks up, his eyes drifting towards Ryoken like he’s having trouble coming up with a plan to get him out of this one. It makes Ryoken take one shaky breath in himself, because either Playmaker gets shot trying to save his skin, Kyoko gets captured trying to keep up this facade, or Ryoken gets shot because he makes reckless decisions. He’s not looking forward to any of those options. “He’s not involved. You don’t have to do this; you’re rarely the one behind the trigger and I don’t think killing him, specifically, will do much.”

Ryoken internally scoffs, because that statement couldn’t be more backward. Kyoko meets Ryoken’s eyes again, and despite the fact that all of this was meant to be a facade in hopes of salvaging his identity, Ryoken is able to pinpoint the moment in which Kyoko’s resolve to not get caught crumbles. Ryoken can tell she wants nothing more than to get far, far away from Hanoi, and Playmaker poses the tempting option of living the rest of her life safely in jail, atoning for what she’d done.

But she already said that it would be a miracle if she ever got behind bars alive. Her jailbreak wasn't even her choice, as far as Ryoken knows. He can't imagine what kind of welcome she would have if she got caught for a second time, and he's seen and even orchestrated punishments himself, never getting any satisfaction from it. It was just what he was meant to do, and he did it, though he guesses they're far more ruthless now without him to have some mercy no matter how insignificant in the face of everything else.

With one heavy sigh, Kyoko drops the gun to the ground, so fast that it actually makes Ryoken flinch away from it, knowing the safety wasn't on. She raises her hands in surrender and looks straight in the eye at Playmaker, who is as serious as Ryoken's ever seen him; Kyoko just effectively decided to take the risk of getting caught by Hanoi instead of trying to kill one or both of them, once again putting Ryoken over herself. Ryoken looks at her with wide eyes, and tries to communicate how thankful he is for this, but Kyoko's hard expression doesn't change. She keeps her gaze on Playmaker, her lips pulled into a hard line, and something about it makes him stiffen, a gut feeling telling him that there are things even he doesn't know.

"I'm not the one leading the search," her voice is measured, low, and it makes his blood run cold, feels himself paling. He tries to reason that the only other two people leading this on Kyoko's level aren't an issue to deal with, but if they're involved with this project, more than any of the other knights, more than Kyoko— he can't ever risk being seen again. He miscalculated how much interest Hanoi has in the Ignis. "I was just assigned this operation as a way to redeem myself. It's not like I was left another choice once they found me, so here I am."

Playmaker frowns at her, clearly smelling something is fishy here. Ryoken takes that second to search him from head to toe with his eyes, and ends up making eye contact with the Ignis; it waves at him from behind Playmaker's hip, but no one else seems to notice. Ryoken acts like he has no idea what the fuck he's seeing.

"What are you looking for here?" Playmaker asks, and Ryoken almost wants to roll his eyes, because it's quite obvious he already knows the answer. There hasn't been an earthquake in a while now, which Ryoken

takes a good sign, but Playmaker is clearly concerned about it— probably because he doesn't know why there were any earthquakes in the first place. Ryoken can just cross his fingers that this means Spectre succeeded. "It's related to the Ignis, isn't it?"

"Oh, you know about that?" Kyoko's eyes drift towards Ryoken, who just looks away and slowly drags himself away from her, standing up slowly as if he fears she'll pull another gun on him. "I might as well tell you the truth, then: we are looking for one for the six Ignis, but we don't know exactly where it is. Digging was our best shot, since I had an idea or where it could be. It's the reason I was assigned this location."

Something about her wording makes Playmaker's eyes widen, and Ryoken feels the same wave of uneasiness that might have hit him. "You mean there are other teams working on location?"

Uncharacteristically cooperative, probably because of the possibility that she might be dead come a few days, Kyoko opens her mouth, but gets interrupted by the sound of cars speeding over the ground and then stopping outside the tent, sounds which are followed by footsteps and people barking orders. He recognizes some of the voices with dread and allows his face to show it— a civilian would certainly be allowed to be pissed there's more Hanoi coming to terrorize them, right? Otherwise, he might just look constipated.

Playmaker jumps into action by stepping forward and grabbing Kyoko by the elbow then signaling for Ryoken to follow him, his voice barely above a whisper and a hand landing on his shoulder with a reassuring squeeze as soon as he gets close enough. Ryoken wonders if he really looks that bad, but the shakiness to his knees is very real— he shouldn't be putting himself in front of guns like that, but at least this time it was a necessity instead of a morbid game of Russian roulette on his cousin's rooftop. "Are you alright?"

Ryoken doesn't do much beside nod, but Playmaker seems to spot the blood over his shirt and hesitates, his brow furrowing like he doesn't believe him one bit. It's clear that his personal relationship with Ryoken is affecting him at some level, but he snaps back into action when more voices ring out,

even closer and signaling that the new arrivals are looking through the campsite.

Playmaker takes them through the same opening Ryoken used to get in but it turned out to be a useless attempt at escaping. They are surrounded, a semi-organized team of Hanoi soldiers with big flashy weapons he hasn't ever seen before pointing at them. One of them steps up, clearly the one that was in charge of this particular band of useless servants, but it isn't until he opens his mouth that Ryoken recognizes him.

"Playmaker," he says, and Ryoken takes a step back, trying to avoid getting noticed right away, but it's useless; going back inside the tent won't do him any favors, and it's not like he can just sneak away when there are lights pointed at him. "Let her go and we can pretend this never happened."

Playmaker clenches his teeth so hard that Ryoken immediately knows there's no way out of this that doesn't require fighting. "Wouldn't it be easier if you just let me take her instead? And then I come back to all of you?"

"Please, as if that—" the man suddenly pauses, and seemingly focuses his eyes on Ryoken and snaps his head fully, recognition flashing across the one uncovered eye. He's wearing the Hanoi uniform, already sullied by the dirt of the mountain, the only detail signaling his rank being that of the band wrapped around his arm; other than that, the usual Hanoi mask without a hood doesn't really hide his identity, so when Ryoken meets his eyes he can't help but feel a wave of nostalgia and fury hitting him first force that he hides under a wide-eyed look. "You are..."

Playmaker, understandably confused at the scene in front of him, takes a step forward, not even flinched at how all guns follow the movement. He moves in front of Ryoken, as if to protect him from the prying looks of people around him, and with the knowledge that he can't see his face like this, Ryoken takes the chance to throw a glare towards their mutual enemy that's met with a raised eyebrow and a surprised tilt of his head.

Faust raises one hand to signal all the knights around him to hold, and when he speaks, it's very clear that Ryoken will have a hard time getting out of

this one.

“Retrieve him, unharmed. Walking away with him it’s far better than walking away with an Ignis.”

Muscles tensing in anticipation, Playmaker lets out what Ryoken could only call a growl. “Ai.”

And then, without much preamble, the Ignis pops out of Playmaker’s bodysuit with a jump, and turns into a tentacle monster mid-air, immediately swatting away with a smack a third of their unprepared and shocked fighting forces. Ryoken, for his part, can only think about one thing only; there’s genuine fear running through his veins, but he’s long learned how to control it and focus on his priorities. Taking hold of Kyoko’s wrist, Ryoken exchanges one look with her and mouths one word only for her to see:

Spectre.

Her eyes widen, her face paling until it looks like paper, and Ryoken knows, without a doubt, that they’ll get out of here. He just has to be smart about it, so when Kyoko twists her hand out of his hold and steps forward, in between Playmaker and Hanoi, Ryoken allows her, and watches her meet Faust’s eyes with the knowledge that he just sacrificed her chance at freedom if not life just to get Spectre more time to get out.

He’s long past not being able to make hard decisions.

Spectre isn’t sure how much time he’s been underground, but it’s starting to worry him. Not because he’s never been underground for this long, but because with every second that passes in which he doesn’t find the Ignis, and with every earthquake, the more dangerous the situation on top of them – and for himself, really – becomes, because there’s no telling just what the Ignis will do after its done with the temper tantrum.

He tries to think of it as a child, no matter how ironic that is considering its origin, because otherwise, he will struggle when trying to get through to it

when he sees it as an artificial-but-not-quite being. Spectre genuinely doesn't want it to run away from him, because he's had that whispery voice in the back of his mind keeping him company for almost as long as he can remember now, and it made life interesting and far less lonely. He wants to know more about it, and not in a necessarily scientific way— no, Spectre is not interested in that kind of study, but he enjoys learning about other life forms. This one happens to be connected to him, so it's only natural that he's *curious*.

This deep underground every earthquake makes him almost fall to his knees and rattles him to the bone, which probably isn't good for him. There are limits his body has, and he has to act within them, but the Ignis is slippery. He doesn't lose any hope of completely missing it or it escaping, because where is it going to go? It might have learned about the human world through him, but that doesn't mean it knows what to do with the information. Spectre doubts the Ignis isn't aware that if it shows up somewhere where people can see it, then it will get pointed at, screamed at, grabbed at and ultimately poked at in some government facility— or with Hanoi.

Minutes pass without any trace of the Ignis, and Spectre walks and walks through the path he's carving until he reaches another underground cave and decides to take a break, exhaustion settling in. He thinks about the possibility of dying, alone, tired and frustrated at a little alien thing, despite having no real reason to think that way beyond mind-numbing boredom. He doesn't think that he's ever used his power continuously for quite this long, so a break was incoming or he would have ended up burning out, but the way he is leaning against the wall of the cave as another earthquake goes through the mountain and his balance fails distracts him from seeing the huge boulder headed right towards him.

If he had seen it and if he hasn't been exhausted already, Spectre would have been able to stop it with no issue whatsoever, but as it stands, he would have been crushed by it if not for the Ignis suddenly jumping out of the ground to attach itself to it, the boulder becoming dust the second its hand touch the surface.

Spectre trips on his own feet from the shock and ends up kneeling on the ground. The Ignis doesn't even turn towards him as it leaves, apparently indifferent to the fact that it just saved his life despite being openly against interacting with him.

It gives Spectre some pause as his heartbeat drums on his ears, and it's barely a few seconds in which he allows himself to feel grateful for this that he decides that he won't waste this chance. The Ignis walks, and every step makes the mountain shake. Spectre can't help but feel a bit fascinated by so much power in something so small, and he doesn't underestimate the quick rush of fear that goes through his veins.

If he wants to get through to the Ignis, then he has to show his respect—and there's little else he's better at than that, when he wants to be.

"Wait!" he yells at the Ignis, struggling to breathe in what little oxygen there is this deep underground, where the little air there is heavy and thick with the smell of the earth itself. It stops, but the earthquake itself keeps going, its subconscious anger making the worse out of the situation. "Just allow me to explain. Things have changed far more than you could have imagined."

There is a slight pause, and then words whispering in the back of his mind as the Ignis turns.

"You came with all this mystery," the Ignis shakes its head, looking genuinely saddened. Something shakes insides Spectre's chest that feels foreign but like it's somehow coming from within him. "You came armed. You are both afraid of me and when I demand answers you want to feed me half-lies."

"I wish it wasn't like this," Spectre says, keeping his voice even. The earth seems to swallow the words, yet the Ignis remains, willing to listen. "See, I can't explain it all here, right now—but you need to know you're in danger. We look suspicious, we know that, but right now there are people on this mountain looking to take you away and lock you up to open you and use you as a lab rat. And those people want us, too, the partners. They think we're theirs."

Spectre doesn't know if the Ignis can swallow, but this one almost seems to do so; its body language is as clear as that of any other human, and it makes admiration and curiosity fill his mind, the natural connection between them only fueling his feelings to get to know the Ignis more.

Spectre wonders if Playmaker felt like this, like something had irreversibly fallen into place, but he guesses that it must have been different, somehow — Ryoken had not stopped complaining about the Ignis seemingly having an active personality, different from the one the Ignis before him is displaying. He likes it; Spectre would have not been able to deal with an extroverted hyperactive little shit. There was only one maniac in the house and that was him.

"Why would they think that?" The Ignis seems hesitant, not willing to trust Spectre yet. "The doctor... didn't he say we would help humanity?"

Old anger bubbles up his throat, the thought of Kogami Kiyoshi meaning to help anyone other than himself almost making him scoff. It's been a while since Spectre's dares to let that man get to him, but here he is anyways, because if there's someone to blame all of this on, it's him.

"The doctor was a liar," Spectre shakes his head, looks down at the ground and clenches his fist, a frown disfiguring his features. "Only ever after his own selfish goals. He's done awful things to all of us, to his own son. There's no telling what plans he set in motion when he was still in charge."

The Ignis doesn't answer right away. Silence grows between them, Spectre's anger slowly winding down until he's back to feeling that almost-sadness that's not quite his own.

"It wasn't meant to be like this," the Ignis clenches its fists, its eyes narrowing and staring at the ground. "This isn't what I... what any of us expected."

Spectre sighs, nodding in agreement. "None of us chose this. But you can help me and Ryoken-sama keep you all safe. He may seem untrustworthy, but that's just how he is. He hasn't put me in danger on purpose once."

The Ignis doesn't look up at Spectre immediately, but the earthquakes aren't happening anymore. Silence grows between them, but they're too deep under the earth for Spectre to hear anything from the surface, and it's with a bit of hesitation that he decides to sit on the ground to make the conversation seem more like they're on even ground. He has hopes that this will turn out well.

"The doctor's son... why do you trust him so much? He is not a part of Dr. Kogami's plans," the Ignis looks up at him with genuinely conflicted eyes; the lack of pupils throw him off, but he sees no indication that the feelings behind them are any less real than something a human might feel. "I know nothing of his beyond his identity, and that's because of you."

Spectre intertwines his fingers together, tapping his thumbs against the back of his hands. "It's a long story."

The Ignis narrows his eyes at him and Spectre sighs again, shrugging once. If he wants to get the Ignis to trust him, he has to come clean—he dislikes doing so in general, of course, because where's the fun in not keeping people on their toes? But regardless, if this is what it takes, then so be it. Never say Spectre doesn't do what has to be done.

"Ryoken-sama saved me as a child," he starts, his voice even and soft. The Ignis sits down as well, long thin legs closed in a perfect imitation of Spectre's position. "I won't go into detail right now, but the gist of it is that after the experiments were done, I found my way back to Dr. Kogami. He had already moved on to... *other projects*, so he wasn't interested in me beyond keeping me as a pet, just in case. Ryoken-sama made sure that I was never in any actual danger, and he suffered every consequence of that without complaining."

"Why would you come back?" The Ignis seems genuinely confused about this, and Spectre hums with a shrug. This, of course, does nothing to stop him, and he feels a pull in his mind right before the Ignis speaks up again. "Did you like the experiments?"

Spectre frowns down at the Ignis, his hands clenching. "Don't you know it's rude to pull feelings or information out of people's mind without consent?"

The Ignis blanches, its eyes widening and taken aback. “Uh, I learned a lot about this world through you, but the information was really filtered. I don’t understand most of it yet.”

Hm, that’s... curious, Spectre thinks, remembering Ryoken’s description of the other Ignis running loose. That didn’t seem to be the case for that one.

“To answer your question,” Spectre continues, clearing his throat, and the Ignis seems to relax at the lack of real annoyance in his voice. “I did not like them, per se. They were awful and all I can really remember in detail is the pain, but I enjoyed the attention and the company. I can’t really hate them as much as the other subjects probably do— my life improved after it, in an odd way, and theirs probably took a downfall.”

The Ignis crossed its arms, clearly not quite where Spectre wants it yet. “Then why are you and the doctor’s son working together like this, separate from anyone else?”

At the question, Spectre takes a second to think about it, wondering just how much should he tell right now and without Ryoken’s explicit permission. The time they both spent under the watch of Hanoi was long, years that now he looks back on with little more than distaste, so he isn’t quite sure where to begin or how to explain what led them to abandon the organization.

They had very different roles, just a few years ago. This plan still felt too new for him, still hasn’t settled in his bones, and the fact that Playmaker got to an Ignis before they did only proved it.

“It’s a bit hard to explain and even harder to understand,” Spectre keeps his voice low, coming up with his train of thought as the words form in his tongue. “The doctor wasn’t looking for you to help humanity. That was probably the truth in the beginning, but after you went into a deep sleep? His motivations changed. He did things... organized things that we could barely handle. He wanted Ryoken to be something he’s not and to find you all again to turn you all into weapons, maybe replicate the experiments to have a superhuman army. It was unclear what he wanted beyond power, but

right now Hanoi is just following in his steps of the plan he came up with years ago.”

The Ignis seems to deflate with every single word out of his mouth, its brow furrowing. Spectre gives it a moment to process everything, the silence almost deafening, and it isn’t until he hears a wet sound that he looks back at the Ignis to see it wipe at its face with its hands, tears running from his eyes. A deep sadness takes root in his heart at the sight, sadness that feels both foreign and familiar tearing deep into his chest, but he hesitates to move, not wanting to interrupt or overwhelm the Ignis and cause another earthquake.

After a few seconds, the Ignis sighs and nods, looking up at Spectre with eyes so human that they make his shoulders slump, real concern over the Ignis growing without any warning.

“You’re telling the truth, aren’t you?”

Spectre opens his mouth, and initially, no sound comes out, but despite it, he finds his voice again, letting his tone be as honest and sympathetic as it’s never been in his life. “I’m afraid so, yes. Ryoken-sama and I might come off as aggressive, I can admit that, but we’re only looking out for us and for all of you. We have the means to keep you safe and dismantle Hanoi from its root... we just need you all to cooperate first, and I guess clearing things up doesn’t hurt.”

The Ignis makes another wet sound that Spectre isn’t quite sure where it’s coming from – it doesn’t seem to have ears, and it’s downright questionable where its voice it’s coming from – but this time he stretches out his hand as an offering like he did earlier, and the Ignis stares at it for a few seconds before taking it, its hand so small in comparison that it hits Spectre, for the first time, that while these little aliens might be dangerous, they are also delicate— literal confused newborns. Once again, he thinks about Playmaker’s Ignis seemingly quite adaptation to sudden life, and wonders if the personality of the origins has anything to do with how the Ignis themselves turn out.

“Can you promise?” The Ignis asks, making eye contact. Spectre swallows, fully prepared to lie if it’s necessary, but there’s a part of him that doesn’t want to have to make fake promises for once. In a way, meeting the Ignis feels a lot like finding a missing puzzle piece— but he’s too compromised to let that fully sway his logic. “Can you promise we will all be safe?”

Spectre sighs with no little amount of relief, because this is something he can be honest about. “I can’t. We will try our hardest, but there are no guarantees when it comes to this. Even then, we’re probably your best chance at survival.”

The Ignis nods like it actually understands and even expected that answer, standing up from the ground and stepping fully over Spectre’s hand. He brings him up to face level, which is a bit awkward, but the Ignis holds on to him and gets comfortable, even if its expression is still grim.

“Alright,” it nods, sounding uncertain yet resigned to this decision. “I will trust you. But only as long as you and the doctor’s son don’t try anything weird.”

“Great,” Spectre says, shooting the Ignis a grin and raising an eyebrow. “Now, what shall I name you? Can’t have you walking around without a name.”

It tilts its head to the side and hums, thinking about it with a furrowed. A couple of seconds later, the Ignis lights up, and with the most cheerful voice Spectre’s heard from it so far, it says: “Earth!”

“Ah,” Spectre shakes his head, trying not to be too rude. So much for originality. “We’ll call it a work in progress, yeah?”

Notes for the Chapter:

baby boy earth is baby boy.

7. recognition (part three, final)

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi, yes, not dead, just busy XD

So, I made a decision regarding this fic, aka, I'm not going to push myself to write just to meet any deadlines I set upon myself. I don't want writing to become work I have to do, you know? I want to enjoy it until I don't, which I don't think will ever happen. I love this fic so much, and you may be getting another update over the next few weeks, maybe. I'm really feeling like dedicating myself to this one for a bit and take a little break from cataclysmic, or something like that, so who knows? I don't, but I feel positive about it.

Anyhow, I hope you all enjoy this, and thanks for everyone that's reading for sticking around!

Spectre comes across Soulburner barely a few minutes after walking out of the cave. His plan was to find Ryoken and go, and if the situation was too dire to just go by himself and secure the Ignis above all, but he wasn't planning to come across him and it was proving to be more time consuming than he wanted it to be. He has the Ignis hidden safely inside his suit jacket, and has to pretend to be a terrified citizen to the best of his ability, even though he can tell that Soulburner senses something strange about him, which, fair. He is pretty weird by himself, and right now he's trying to hide an alien baby. Not exactly his definition of fun, though very, very close to it.

From what he can gather, Soulburner and Playmaker split up to search around, and Soulburner has clearly been busy. His hair is a mess, his face is so dirty with grime from the earth it looks like someone literally rubbed it against the ground – which might as well be the case because his nose wasn't looking too pretty – and there are splatters of blood across his suit. He knows he isn't the type to kill, so he can only guess this is second-hand or his own blood, most likely from his nose.

He's a hot mess, and Spectre almost rolls his eyes at himself for that pun.

“I’ll lead you back to the hiking path, yeah?” He’s saying to him, slowly, as if he’s a child that needs guidance, to which Spectre agrees silently and plays into the role. He’s never really interacted with anyone that Ryoken knows face to face that isn’t Miyu before, so he’s trying to measure him up. None the wiser, Soulburner just smiles at him and takes his arm as if Spectre were to wander off on his own— which, he would, since it’s his priority to avoid conflict and keep the Ignis safe and out of anyone else’s hands. “What were you doing here before the attack?”

Spectre wonders if someone has ever told him how transparent he is when he’s trying to gather information, and guesses that someone like Playmaker *must have*. If he didn’t then Spectre would have to question Ryoken’s taste even more. “Taking a hike to clear my mind, but I guess it was bad timing.”

“Is the van parked out yours, then?”

Ah, Spectre had forgotten about that detail. To be fair, neither he nor Ryoken thought that the afternoon would turn into this within a couple of hours, so they couldn’t have prevented someone from discovering their vehicle. At least they had half a mind to not store any personal objects inside and to leave no trace of them renting it.

Meeting Soulburner’s eyes and smiling a bit sheepishly, Spectre nods. “Yeah, it is. Is it alright?”

“Yeah, it seemed fine when we got here,” Soulburner stares into his eyes for a few seconds, his voice paused as if he can tell there’s something off about him and he can’t exactly pinpoint what it is. Spectre tries to keep up the charade, but the urge to roll his eyes at him and walk away is strong. “C’mon, I’ll help you get back to the hiking path, I’m sure the police will be here shortly and they can look after you.”

Spectre smiles and nods, but he can tell that the non-human part of them is clearly recognizing the other, which is why Soulburner is not leaving him despite him clearly having been on his way to do something, perhaps find Playmaker. He won’t get anything, though; Spectre is too good at pretending to be normal for someone that’s often shortsighted like Soulburner to notice it. It’s risky, for him to know anything about him or

even of his existence; he and Ryoken have gone to extremes to guarantee that there's little to no record of the fact that he's alive in the system. He went missing in the system years ago for a second time, which turned out to be a permanent haul. He is confident that he's been declared dead simply so the officers could shake the case off their hands and he was just a kid, after all. There were no odds of him surviving each of those kidnappings.

And yet here he is, crossing his fingers for Soulburner to keep his mouth shut for now. He might be at least kind of cute to look at, with those big worried deer eyes, if he just didn't get in his way.

It's clear, by the sounds around them, that there's something going on in the mountain. Several times, as they move through it, Soulburner pulls him into a kneeling position on the ground behind bushes and trees when cars or bikes pass by, and he can't help but think of the hilarity of someone so bright in presence going unnoticed. It's certainly a miracle that he hasn't set the forest on fire yet.

"Ok, look," Soulburner sets his hand on his shoulder and looks into his eyes, to which Spectre tries to not immediately tell him off. He's way too touchy of a person, and he doesn't know if it's just because of the vibes they're giving each other or because he's just that kind of hero that relies on physical contact to comfort people. Spectre's sure someone would have noticed in the forums about him if he was extra-touchy with civilians, and he hasn't seen any of that during his long hours of keeping an eye on Ryoken's mess. "I need to go take a look at that. Will you be alright on your own?"

Oh, Spectre wants to roll his eyes *so bad*. "Yeah, I know this mountain really well. I'll be sure to not be noticed."

Soulburner hesitates, unfortunately. He gets this concerned look on his face like he wants to wrap Spectre in a blanket and personally escort him home; it might be a cute sight for fanboys, but for Spectre it was just a nuisance because he *really* didn't need to be fussed over by a flaming idiot with awful fashion choices for this job. At least Playmaker was a bit more subtle.

“I’ll be fine, Soulburner-san,” Spectre tries to be as convincing as he can be, smiling softly and shooting him wide eyes that are brimming with fake-fake confidence. A skill he’s proud of, really. “You can go. The hiking path is not that far away.”

Soulburner lingers for a few seconds and then, with a heavy sigh, nods and stands up, looking like guilt is already eating him up inside. So noble, yet so inconvenient. “Alright, but be careful, okay? I’m sure that now that the earthquakes are down emergency services are going to try to get everyone into safe places. Stick with them, alright? There’s already a small group of people I left there, so you won’t be alone.”

Spectre nods, as pleasant as he never is, but the mention of other people makes Spectre’s curiosity spike. Judging by his wording, they must have been kidnapping victims from Hanoi transports or something of the like, since they often bring in people to either do bargains or forced into work in order to test new experiments. He would go right over and take a look at their state himself, but the Ignis in his breast pocket shifts and Spectre is reminded of his task.

The only one he would ever listen to is Ryoken anyways, and he’s busy probably getting involved with whatever Soulburner is going to deal with. Certainly no place for an alien baby.

Soulburner leaves without taking a single look back, making Spectre wonder if he’s just relieved that he doesn’t have to deal with him anymore or if he just really allows civilians to handle themselves this easily. He can’t blame him at all though; Spectre knows he gives off a weird vibe, and likes it that way for how convenient it is for his very small and simple existence. He’s never needed people, not really, even if he enjoys the attention of other humans—which sounds like he’s a bit of a snob, but it’s really just a matter of not liking most people.

He has no regrets about leading a quiet life helping Ryoken. He doesn’t really need or want a professional career, and he’s happy just taking a few classes here and there to scratch the curiosity, and perhaps that will change with time and after all is done... but not right now. He has debts to repay

and promises to keep, and he's not one to let simple curiosity get in between his loyalties, not really.

Feeling some rustling coming from his jacket again, Spectre opens it up and looks down at the Ignis, who seems admittedly far too comfortable in his breast pocket. It looks up at him with curious eyes, and Spectre just sighs, raising an eyebrow in question. The Ignis takes the hint, clearing its throat – does it *have* a throat? – and blinking a few times, which strikes Spectre as something someone who is incredibly socially awkward would do. It's a bit wholesome coming from a pocket-sized alien.

“I don’t understand why you and Kogami-san don’t just speak to them.”

Spectre immediately cringes at the way Earth – seriously, he doesn’t know if he’ll be able to live with that name – decides to address Ryoken, shaking his head both at the name and the actual meaning behind the words.

“Don’t call him that,” it doesn’t come out quite like an order, the words soft, but there’s a sense of finality to it that Earth seems to understand. “We don’t tell the other victims because they shouldn’t be involved in the first place.”

“And you should be?”

At that, Spectre pauses his steps, his expression turning into a frown as he looks down at the Ignis again. Earth looks genuinely curious about this, which automatically makes Spectre feel less pissed off at the question, so he looks around, takes in the silence, and decides that it’s safe enough to talk here, even then keeping his voice hushed.

“I chose to get involved when I went back to the place of the events,” Spectre takes a deep breath, memories from so long ago resurfacing, but like always feels no regret about that choice. He knows without question that if Ryoken hasn’t been there when he did, then he’d feel very differently. “The others moved on— or tried to, in the case of people like Playmaker and Soulburner who are still looking for answers. They shouldn’t spend their lives angry and chasing ghosts, and we and Ryoken-sama hope to help them live safely, same as with you.”

Earth keeps quiet after that, probably thinking over his words, so Spectre decides to keep walking and make the most out of this conversation, not really minding the silence. He's anxious to get away, of course, and wants to find Ryoken, but he knows better than to try. It's best if he just goes home undetected; Soulburner getting wind of him might not be good, but he doubts it will give him much trouble considering he didn't even get his name. On another hand, though, he wonders if Soulburner is going to be able to figure out the aura of an Ignis once he comes closer the one under Playmaker's care. He's going to have to scramble from campus for a while, which is going to be a shame for the gardening club.

"Aren't you and Kogami-kun lonely?" Earth speaks up, very nearly making him trip over his own feet. Spectre can't even glare at it, because the question is genuine, but it sits wrong inside him, lands in his gut like a punch. Earth looks up at him with almost concerned eyes, and Spectre almost resents the honesty reflected on them. "Our kind does better in groups."

"Well," Spectre starts, for once not being exactly sure of what's going to come out of his mouth. "I wouldn't say we're doing too badly by ourselves. And we do know other people, but we try not to get them too involved."

Earth considerably perks up at that. "Like who?"

Spectre has to make a mental count of how many people he knows from his few classes – Zaizen Aoi comes to mind with a flashback of getting his nose broken that one time – and then sighs, shaking his head. There's only one person apart from Ryoken who he truly could count as more than a simple acquaintance, her current lover notwithstanding.

"You'll meet her soon enough."

Playmaker has no idea what the fuck is going on anymore.

The last ten minutes have been a roller coaster of feelings, what with the way the earthquakes just *stopped*, how Dr. Taki willingly decided to drop what she implied might be her chance at leaving Hanoi for good by

throwing herself in the middle of this, and finding Kogami Ryoken *of all people* as a hostage. Faust and Dr. Taki are having a stare-down now, and he's deeply perturbed with how he just doesn't understand anything.

It's frustrating; Yusaku's been chasing after answers for so long and being met with a situation that he clearly doesn't know much about puts him on edge. The fact that they want to *retrieve Ryoken*—

He stays on guard, looks around at the remaining soldiers standing and hopes his idea to bring out Ai doesn't backfire, because it was a split-second decision at the implication that Faust isn't leaving this place without Ryoken in tow. Playmaker knows, of course, that they might have some strange leftover purist ideals from Dr. Kogami and getting him might have to do with that, but he can't quite comprehend how he can be more important than the Ignis itself—unless he got messed with as well as a kid, but there are no records of Dr. Kogami ever getting his son involved in his projects, or even taking him to his workplace, from what Playmaker's been able to find hidden deep in SOL's database and any scientific oriented journals Dr. Kogami was ever involved with, as well as with the bounty hunter bribes he's been involved with.

He knows he's angry about it, though, and if they come out of this alive – which he'll make sure they will because hell if he's letting fucking *Faust* be his end – he'll definitely be saying yes to that date. He'd like to trick himself into it being only because he wants to repay Ryoken somehow for this mess or keep an eye out for his safety, but really, he's just incredibly fed up with everyone he knows right now except Kusanagi-san, Jin, and *maybe* Takeru.

No, he's not going to think about Revolver right now, unless it is to curse the fact that he's not here despite being pretty aggressively involved in everything this morning. What a bitch. Playmaker doesn't know where this fits exactly in his theory about him being involved with Ryoken somehow, and *it bothers him*. Everything seems to be backward, and he feels more defenceless than Ryoken, who looks like he could barely hurt a fly right now, with the way his body was shaking moments before.

“We should calm down,” Playmaker speaks up, which, yes, he knows is hypocritical of him, but he’s out of his depth. Several Hanoi soldiers seem to be torn between pointing their guns at him or at Taki, and he can’t really blame them—they seem as if not more confused than he is. “Dr. Taki, stand back—”

“This is not your place to speak, Playmaker,” she snaps, not even turning to look at him. “You would do well limiting your participation in this as much as you could.”

The expression on his face must be priceless, he has no doubt on that. Playmaker looks at Faust, finds him tense and focused but not nearly as confused as he expected him to be; he notices him glancing at Ryoken, measuring up Taki like he’s trying to guess what her intentions are, but after a few expectant seconds he just tilts his head to the side, looks straight at Ai, and hums.

As if she was waiting for her cue, Taki speaks up. “I’m willing to negotiate.”

Ai makes a choked off sound beside him, so Playmaker pulls at his weird monster form, ignoring the odd feeling of his skin, to signal for him to not get involved. It was reckless, calling for him, and he was starting to regret letting Hanoi know that he was this close on their tails. He spares a glance back towards Ryoken and reaches out to grab his wrist, fingers wrapping softly around it and seemingly startling him because he tenses up, flinching in response before relaxing once he meets his eyes. He seems like he’s trying to avoid having a panic attack over this situation and Playmaker can hardly blame him—he needs to make sure, afterwards, that Ryoken wasn’t harmed and that he got looked over by a medic, but his attention quickly returns to the events at hand.

“On what grounds, exactly, would you be able to negotiate with us?” Faust says, raising an unimpressed eyebrow, and Playmaker is inclined to agree with him. Dr. Taki, as much as she must hold a grudge against Hanoi, was still working with them; there’s logically no reason for her to have a leg up on them at all. “You’ve been helpful these past few months, Kyoko, but you

have nothing you could hold against us—not even your knowledge of our plans.”

Taki’s facial expression grows tight, a flicker of doubt going through her gaze, but she keeps her resolve, and Playmaker feels Ryoken’s heartbeat going haywire with her next words. “I’m willing to hand myself over to your forces in exchange for the doctor’s son. What is he going to be useful for, after all? He’s nothing more than damaged goods by this point.”

Something about the way she says it makes an alarm go off inside Playmaker’s brain, and even Ai seems to recoil at it, curling in on himself but making a deep, frankly scary growling sound when, on Faust’s command, the Hanoi soldiers advance, closing them in even further. Before Playmaker can speak up, though, or even think about going on the offensive because the more they linger the more dangerous it gets, Faust is talking.

“You and I both know that he’s more valuable than you are. Even a piece of him, or Playmaker, or the Ignis, is more useful than you could be to this organization,” Faust pauses, his eyes narrowing, and Playmaker unconsciously tightens his grip on Ryoken’s wrist. “I told you to let go of your attachments long ago. There’s nothing left for you but *us*.”

Dr. Taki lets out a laugh that rings, too loud and biting. “Is that so? After all this time?”

Seemingly at lost, Faust frowns, opening his mouth for what Playmaker can only imagine is a reaffirmation of his words, but then, faster than he could have expected, Taki is dropping a knife on her hand from the inside of her sleeve and *throwing it at him*.

Playmaker doesn’t look at whether it lands or not, instead pulling Ryoken towards him to try and tail it, but there’s too many Hanoi around them still, even considering the ones that were knocked back by Ai. He hears the sounds of someone choking, wet and panicked, but he doesn’t recognize the top of Taki’s head over the sea of white of the Hanoi, and he also can’t see Faust anywhere, as they all throw themselves at him. One would think they would go after Taki, but Playmaker can only guess that Faust’s intentions are to get them, at any cost, because of their value to them.

He hears gunshots and barely misses a few bullets pointed his way, focused on covering Ryoken instead, and Ai is acting almost as a shield, parting the way for them at the same time he covers their backs, a massive mass of black and purple making it even harder to tell what's going on exactly, but the limitation of space and the amount of people surrounding them doesn't allow him to take advantage of it and disappear into the many shadows that present themselves as opportunities.

He's confident he can get out of this one alive, and to get Ryoken alive as well, but a part of him refuses to let go of his wrist; Ryoken isn't exactly light or easy to drag around, the muscle that Yusaku's suspected he has made him heavier than he expected him to be, which is an issue. He doesn't know if Ryoken would be able to stand his own for long enough for Playmaker to help out Ai, but he needs to take a risk for the sake of breaking through them without being shot in the process.

He lets go of him with no small amount of dread pooling in his stomach, pushing through the mass of Ai's body and jumping straight towards the Hanoi with the biggest weapons in sight, punching and kicking and never, for one second, staying still. Someone manages to shoot him and hit him, but the bullet barely grazes him thanks to his suit and he barely feels it over the adrenaline running through his veins. It's easy to snatch a gun from someone's hand and hit another person right between the eyes with the back of it, the sounds of bone breaking barely reaching his ears over that of Ai's movements to protect Ryoken and the fighting, the gunshots; someone kicks him hard enough behind his knees to make him fall to the ground, but he's quick to turn around and shoot the gun at their shoulder, letting go of it immediately after to focus on this one guy that grabs him by the hair, *hard*, and pulls him up, only to get kicked by him in the balls and pushed towards three of his comrades.

There's a lot of screaming coming from Ai's side, and he doesn't know if he's killing them or eating them or *what*, but Playmaker is starting to grow a little bit tired, the reminder of the kicking he took this morning making itself known in the way his ribs start screaming when someone makes him take a good punch on them, and his head is absolutely pounding because of

a migraine, but he pushes through, the Hanoi numbers reducing slowly, yes, but surely.

He's confident they'll get out of this perfectly fine, if not a bit worse for wear— and then the trucks arrive, with them the sounds of guns being cocked into placed and capes brushing the earth, and annoyance and anger and perhaps just a little bit of hopelessness run through his body and only makes him more violent. He considers retreating, because growth in numbers won't bear well for Ryoken's safety, but then that would only make it easier for him to be cornered.

He's about to risk it all and just use up all his energy to send big groups of them away with shadows when the sound of screams increase and the distinct smell of burning wood reaches his nose.

All of his body instantly relaxes, which comes at the hard price of getting punched in the nose— he's not positive it's broken, but it hurts, and he makes it clear to the one that punched him by slamming them into the nearest tree with a sound that, had he been a lesser man, would have made him shiver.

As he retreats back to help Ai cover Ryoken, Playmaker thinks he's never been any more glad that Soulburner's here—

But he's *still* late.

Soulburner's been surprisingly busy and, perhaps embarrassingly, a little bit lost until he came across the fight.

He's not the best hiker— you can't be a fan of it when you're a literal fire hazard, and he has always preferred sparring as exercise anyways, so despite the fact that he was into the idea to split up, he was internally regretting it for the first few minutes until he quite literally stumbled into an open Hanoi camp in a meadow. Needless to say, it kept him tied up for quite a bit, because it isn't easy to not melt the skin off people and not burn down a forest while trying to not rely purely on physical strength.

He didn't break a sweat, no, but it was enough of a distraction that he could barely keep up with Playmaker's words about Dr. Taki through his earpiece before hearing the telltale sound of Playmaker's side dying, rendering any attempts at communication useless. He's also taken quite the beating; he didn't do so bad this morning, but that was because he was in an area he didn't have to be so painfully careful in, so he's positive his nose is broken and he's bleeding from somewhere, though he can't quite tell from where.

He didn't think that there would be any civilians on the mountain, but he was proven wrong when the cargo found in the transport units that were in the Hanoi camp he attacked turned out to be full of people put in an artificial coma that were probably going to be forced to do who-knows-what as experimentation. He frees them all, helps them down the mountain and makes sure to put them in a spot where the police will hopefully be able to find them fast, and he would have stayed had he not had a bad feeling about Playmaker.

Then he found yet another guy, pale with silvery hair and wearing a casual suit, of all things, his clothes covered in dust and dirt, which was rather weird, but he had no time to carry on an in-depth interrogation when something was tugging at his stomach to find Playmaker. He probably made a fool of himself with him, with how he tried to gather information, but at least he washed his hands off the situation with enough reassurance to get going.

He's almost relieved to find the chaos, to be honest, even if it's still too close of a rather dangerous situation he throws himself at, but Playmaker was clearly struggling with the attackers, what he assumes is Ai going all out in monster form shielding him and Kogami Ryoken by absorbing bullets into his goo-like flesh—

Takeru almost gets stabbed because he turns his back to his attacker to get a second look at Playmaker and make sure he's not seeing things, but yes, there he is, Yusaku's undeniable crush and the royal pain in the ass that is Kogami Ryoken, tense and looking around as if he doesn't know what to do for once in his life. It is a nice change; Kogami's always been way too smooth at everything for Takeru's liking, and hearing Yusaku gush about

him all the time doesn't help, but it is a rather crude reminder that he's yet another helpless civilian under his care.

...a helpless civilian who just punched a Hanoi minion coming at him so hard they seemed to have passed out cold, maybe even broken something, without Playmaker even noticing, but Soulburner's too busy being grabbed by his midsection and lifted off the ground by another enemy before he can think much of it.

There are some unsavory advantages to being able to change his body temperature at will, like hearing someone scream in pain because his skin is hot enough for it to burn, but they come in handy. Keeping his body this hot might overheat him any second now, for sure, but it's his best chance right now. He already burned a few trees on accident when he charged in at full force, but it wasn't spreading and it was a clear warning that things were about to get uncomfortably stuffy here for those white-collar coats the Hanoi like to wear.

"Soulburner!" He hears, and spins around while grabbing onto the wrist of someone pointing a gun at him to look at Playmaker as he hits them in the jaw hard enough for them to faint. His eyes are panicked, and he's clearly at his limit yet holding back, likely because of an escape plan he's already sketched in his mind. He's pale and stands strong, but his eyes keep drifting back to Kogami in an almost unconscious matter. "We can't clear this right now! We need to leave!"

Soulburner gets the message and grins, closing his hands into fists. "Does that mean I have permission?!"

Playmaker doesn't answer, too busy intercepting someone that was headed right for Ryoken's back, but Soulburner takes that as a yes and, reminding himself yet again that he's in a forest, fires up his fists.

The fire licks at the patches of skin visible through his gloves and runs up his forearms until everyone around him is moving back, retreating to avoid any burns. He would be done for if they had any water gun or something like that, but Hanoi is unprepared and inefficient as always, even if they might have suspected they were coming.

“Alright, everyone, it was fun!” He calls, taking careful steps towards Playmaker and not holding back his grin at how everyone stumbles out of his path, especially when he allows the flames to flare up higher, trying to keep it controlled yet sending a clear message. “Unless anyone wants a new burn scar I suggest you scramble, yeah?”

He says that, but some of the Hanoi members with thicker layers and protection throw themselves at him, trying to slow him down as gunshots ring through the air. He thinks he’s hit by two of them, at least, but the suit keeps him from taking too much damage, and the temperature of his body is high enough to melt the guns right out of the thugs’ hands by now.

As if on cue, the sounds of helicopters reach his ears, a quick glance up letting him see the logo for the local police on the side of it, and Soulburner’s grin turns almost inappropriately big. Playmaker sets a hand on his shoulder once he reaches them, not even flinching as his suit’s gloves steam at the heat he’s letting out, and they exchange a quick look before moving into a position that will allow Kogami to be safe from all fronts. Kogami, who keeps as much distance from him as possible because he has no heat protection and looks like he’s had a rather rough evening, and Soulburner almost feels bad for him.

“Aha! Human helpers!” Ai says, hopefully about the police and not about Soulburner being around, his voice distorted into a low growl that, paired with his cheerfulness, makes Soulburner shiver. Ai is far too close to something out of a horror movie with his strange dark flesh, the implication of sharp teeth behind a huge drooling mouth and one single yellow and inhuman eye for him to be anything other than uncomfortable. No one else even seems phased by it and he judges everyone around him for it, though Playmaker does wince at Ai’s next words. “This is so much fun, who would have thought catching bullets tickles this much!”

Takeru really hates life sometimes.

At the presence of police above them, who clearly have snipers on board because of the way shots seem to ring out from the sky, the Hanoi forces seem to fall into chaos, all of them dividing up and struggling to run away,

giving their group of a big alien, a flaming person, and a slick-ass edgy fighter a wide berth.

They quickly walk into the woods, Playmaker leading the way while Ai follows them by shrinking himself into a smaller form, something closer to a mountain lion than a sci-fi horror monster. He listens to Playmaker softly asking Kogami if he's okay while this happens and *almost*, just almost rolls his eyes at Kogami's answer.

"It's fine, I didn't get hurt," a pause, in which Soulburner assumes Playmaker might be staring because Kogami looks so bad it sounds like a lie. He is, however, not prepared for his next words, and almost trips over a tree branch. "This blood isn't mine. That woman, Dr. Taki... she treated me rather nicely."

Not able to keep his mouth shut, Soulburner decides to speak up. "Did they get you? I would have expected anyone they kidnapped to be with the transports I found earlier."

Out of the corner of his eye, Soulburner spots Playmaker shooting him a glare, but he only shrugs. He does have a right to hear it.

"I was going on a walk to think about some personal things and suddenly got attacked. They seemed to recognize me and brought me to that woman." Smile slipping from his lips, Soulburner's shoulder tense, his good mood suddenly gone. He knows about Kogami's rather disgraceful familial bloodline, and how there's actually no ties at all to Hanoi from the research Playmaker's done, but the idea that he might be a target for Hanoi, amidst all of this, makes his hair stand on end. There's something brewing that he doesn't like at all. "I don't really know what's going on..."

Playmaker, seeing his chance to keep Soulburner from being too straightforward about information that shouldn't leak to the public, is the one to reassure him. "Don't worry about it. We'll make sure to talk to the police about what happened to you and they'll be able to help you figure out extra security—"

Surprisingly, Kogami cuts off Playmaker's offer, taking a few, sudden steps away from them, almost colliding against Ai, who's been walking behind him this whole time. "I, uh, actually have a bodyguard and a whole team. I have been threatened before, so—"

None of them hear it or see it until the gun goes off.

Soulburner immediately turns towards the sound, running towards it without bothering to look at the result of it, already cursing himself in his head because of getting distracted by a conversation when they weren't out of the woods yet—figuratively and literally. He finds the guy easily enough, a middle-aged man who's hand is shaking on the gun he's still holding up and looking off towards their group as if in a daze, mumbling things under his breath that manage to make Soulburner's hair stand on end.

"...alive, our general, need to let them know, the team needs to *know*—"

He barely seems to notice Soulburner reaching out and grabbing the gun from his hand to melt it into nothing. It doesn't feel nearly as justified to knock out this guy as it usually does, with how he barely makes a sound of pain, and a quick look at his mask tells him that he was under mind control as well, so he makes sure to crush it just enough to disable the system and picks him up to throw him over his shoulder, determined to get him to a doctor.

It's not so often that they find that Hanoi still uses mind control even for their less useful or important soldiers. When they try to leave or disobey, it's either this or some other form of punishment if not death, as far as Soulburner does. He wonders how long this guy has been missing, and if there's anyone waiting for him, before heading back towards the team.

It's obvious at first glance that Playmaker wasn't hit by the shot, since he's standing, but then Soulburner's eyes focus on Kogami's face and his blood cools violently fast when he realizes he's slowly hunching over, until Playmaker actually reacts and grabs at his shoulders, pulling him upright and looking as panicked as Soulburner's ever seen him. Ai heads towards him and nudges Soulburner until he gets the hint and drops the guy he

saved on his back, the skin on it reforming to keep him tightly in place, in order to allow him to take a closer look at Kogami.

Kogami's breath suddenly rushes out in a gasp as Soulburner approaches, his bodyweight only being held up by Playmaker, but there's no blood seeping through his shirt or his pants. When he talks, his voice is laced through with pain, and it's so jarring to his usual no-nonsense tones that Soulburner feels like he's burning with anger again, this time at the idea that someone he helped save, a civilian, someone he *knew* got hurt thanks to him being distracted.

"Hey, look at me. Where's the wound?" Playmaker asks, his voice urgent, and Soulburner moves without thinking about it to set his hand on Kogami's shoulder, help Playmaker balance him, but his face pales with it and another gasp leaves his lips, which makes him take it off, but there's no wound on his shoulder either.

For a moment, Soulburner thinks he's going to have to run his hands all over him in order to find the wound, but one of Kogami's hands shakily gestures towards his right leg, the side of his body over which Soulburner is hovering. He is instantly kneeling, grabbing Ryoken's knee and pulling the fabric of his jeans upwards when the gesture doesn't make him flinch. He finds the bullet right over his ankle, and it falls the second Soulburner barely grazes it with a finger, bending like it's already been used before and it was somehow repurposed and shot once more. He stares at it for a few seconds, flabbergasted at how Kogami isn't even *bleeding*, but he snaps back online when Playmaker calls for him, between concerned and agitated.

"Soulburner, is it too bad?"

He stares at it some more and then looks up, catching Kogami's eyes and finding him squinting as if to will any pain away. He isn't sure of how he's going to explain this, but he can't just say he's fine. "...it's not that bad. I think the bullet must have collided against a tree or something and bounced on his leg. It kind of stuck to his skin but it fell out. It's wrecked. He's going to have some ugly bruising at best. Can you lean on that foot?"

Kogami seems to struggle to get his jaw to unclench. “I think so. You should go, I—I don’t think anyone’s here.”

He has a point, Soulburner thinks but doesn’t say, exchanging a look with Playmaker. “Do I carry him?”

“I’ll do it,” Playmaker shakes his head, and looks at Kogami right when he opens his mouth, his expression turned into a frown. “We need to get out fast and get you in an ambulance. You’ll be safer with me for travel.”

“Will I?” Kogami swallows, and Soulburner sighs, biting back a grimace. That’s always a good question. “You guys seem to bring more danger to situations than it’s worth.”

At this, Soulburner raises an eyebrow, but Playmaker just stares at Kogami as if willing him to give in to his dead stare. He doesn’t, so he decides to speak up. “Do you not like us, then? The work we do?”

“I like both of you,” Kogami says, blue eyes zeroing on him, and something about the gesture is... almost familiar, but not something he remembers Kogami doing before. “I like both of you a lot, in fact, but it doesn’t mean I can’t see patterns. What will you do once you drop me off? Hanoi will still be out there and who knows if they found what they were looking for. I eavesdropped enough while they held me at gunpoint and it didn’t sound good, and you’re both wasting your time on me when I could probably walk back on my own.”

Soulburner’s eyes narrow, a little bit of indignant anger flaring inside him. “Are you nuts? You were kidnapped and held hostage and you’re apparently a target to kill, considering what you have told me and what just happened. We can’t leave you here, for your own safety—”

“He has a point,” Playmaker interrupts, echoing his thoughts from moments ago, and before any of them can say something, he’s turning around with clear intent, his posture leaving no room for argument. “We are wasting time, but we’re not leaving him. Soulburner, help him get on my back. We’re shadow-travelling to the hiking path.”

“Hold on—” Kogami protests, but Playmaker is kneeling and Soulburner is grabbing him, carefully leading him to wrap his arms around Playmaker’s smaller figure and raise his legs in order for Playmaker to rise with him on his back. To Soulburner’s surprise, he wobbles once he’s upright, a grunt leaving his lips. “This is unnecessary, you should both leave me—”

“We don’t leave anyone behind,” Playmaker tightens his grip, knowing Soulburner is right behind him in case Kogami slips from his back. “You have a big mouth on you and you’re *quite* heavy, so if you were quiet that would be much appreciated.”

Soulburner hides a snort behind a cough as Kogami seems to quietly boil in anger. In his opinion, this was comeuppance. For what? Well, Kogami was bound to do a stupid or annoying thing or make Yusaku do stupid or annoying things, so he had at least this one memory to come back to when he felt petty about it now.

“Alright then,” Soulburner sets a hand on Playmaker’s shoulder, not able to keep his grin down. “Take it away, chief.”

Ai moves towards them, pawing playfully at Playmaker’s ankle. “Do you want some help?”

Playmaker nods and takes a deep breath as Ai seems to extend his body to wrap himself around him, the guy Soulburner saved still held tightly, and shadows start dancing around them, more than they usually do when Playmaker is preparing. Soulburner bites back a shiver at the coldness of it, still not fond of the feelings of falling and a void-like nothingness that come with Playmaker’s ability, but when he’s prepared and he rises his foot to take a step, Soulburner does it with him.

As soon as it touches the ground, the world goes black.

If it were possible, Ryoken would sue someone, *anyone*, as revenge for the pain blossoming up his leg.

He's aware that Hanoi's bullets are designed almost exclusively for him. The knowledge isn't comforting, considering he has no means of protecting himself from them other than dodging and hoping they never get a good shot in, because while they are too weak to kill him under most situations they still hurt like a bitch. He's seen Onizuka take these bullets and be out of commission afterwards because of them, the specially modified metal enough to put him down if enough effort is made. If Hanoi didn't insist on producing bioweapons, they could probably create a half-competent military army strong enough to take over Den City.

Ryoken almost does that for them, anyways. It's not his fault they dropped the projects he was leading while on command, and he knows the development of those bullets is so expensive *and* extensive that producing big batches is virtually impossible. They have his DNA in them, which is one of the reasons they're short on resources for them, and he's quite glad he left before they could figure out how to exploit it to make them stronger and hurt him further. The most important part of creating a weapon was being able to destroy it if push came to shove, and that applied to Ryoken as well.

The testing period while he was there was horrible in and of itself, memories that kept him up at night so often he barely knew sleep, that made him get sweaty and flinch at the sight of guns or someone else's hands if he didn't push past the fear. Throughout the last few years, Hanoi seemed to still be testing batches, the members that he faced switching to handguns the second they saw him probably in hopes of gathering data. He knows by now a headshot could probably knock him out if the hit is from a close enough distance, but he's never bled. They are the equivalent to hitting a surface so hard you know you'll barely be able to walk afterwards, which is rare for Ryoken and an experience he doesn't enjoy for a myriad of other additional reasons.

Being on Playmaker's back is nothing short of denigrating, though. He can barely handle Ryoken's weight, and not out of lack of strength. Ryoken feels his own skin almost like sandpaper sometimes, but it's just the friction of his own flesh, and he's probably comparatively normal to anyone else's touch, but not being able to be killed by outside wounds comes with the

price of him being a dead weight meaning he weights at least twice as much as he does when he's in keeping himself in check.

He would make it easier on Playmaker's back by not leaning against him and letting him hold him up, but he doesn't think he would be able to explain it away if he held himself up and the pain in his leg is bad enough that he doesn't mind not having to hold it up himself. Soulburner keeps looking at him as if Ryoken will try to jump off, which he would under any other circumstances, but they reach the police waiting at the bottom of the hiking path barely a few minutes after they land from Playmaker's shadow travelling so he doesn't even get a chance.

He's immediately taken to an ambulance to get checked while the Ignis stays behind to hide from any human catching sight of him, Soulburner taking the guy that shot him from it in order to hand him over to the police for custody. He takes notice of the cracked mask on his face and grinds his teeth together, knowing he'll have to take care of it. The fact that he didn't miss him despite Ryoken noticing his presence and trying to edge away from the gunfire is impressive, and if he had been alone, he would have choked him dead too. He can't have people that remember him taking care of their training going around.

A part of him has wondered over the last few years how come Hanoi hasn't simply stormed his home and taken him away, but he knows yet doesn't want to acknowledge that they are expecting him to come back on his own, for one reason or another. That, or they're waiting for provocation, and he feels that this sudden shooting at him within sight might just be the start of his time before an attack to his person running out. He's going to have to get Spectre to stay with Miyu for a while, or go out of town with the Ignis. Whatever he agrees to first.

"Hey, you," Ryoken hears, and looks up from the paramedic wrapping his hurt ankle in bandages to keep his foot still to see Playmaker glancing over him, arms crossed and shoulders tense. "I'd like to talk with you for a second, if you don't mind."

Ryoken and the paramedic make eye contact and she's smart enough to smile at him and go '*well, you seem fine now, so I'll leave you*', and

Playmaker takes her place in front of him, only he's not kneeling at his feet, which—that's a damn shame, really.

"Weren't you and Soulburner going to look into what Hanoi did?" Ryoken asks, trying to appear as concerned as just another citizen whose life is under the hands of two nut-heads. He likes Playmaker, arguably more than he likes anything else in his life, and Soulburner is tolerable when he's not being an idiot, but he still absolutely hates the fact that they willingly dedicate their lives to this, when they could be like Miyu and just try to carry on as normal as Ryoken handles his mistakes.

Playmaker, oblivious to the quiet indignant anger boiling inside Ryoken over the events of the day, shrugs, as if he were used to talking to civilians like this. He's awful at pretending he doesn't know him. "The police doesn't trust us to do interrogation. Said we had to get either a permit by registering as government agents at the city hall, be sponsored by a company, or get our own suspects through illegal means. Soulburner is still arguing with them, but we'll handle it later."

Ryoken tries not to smile at the sheer ridiculousness of Soulburner trying to convince the police of letting him take someone into illegal custody. The thug side of Homura Takeru slipping out is almost too much for Ryoken. "Ah, I see."

"I was wondering if you were able to provide information for us instead," Playmaker says, and Ryoken's eyebrows shoot up to his forehead. Playmaker seems unaffected, but Ryoken notices the slight twitch of his mouth, as if he was holding himself from downright accusing Ryoken of knowing more than he does. "Why do you think Hanoi wants you either dead or with them?"

Ryoken pretends to think about it, and then gives him a helpless shrug. "I have no idea. Maybe I pissed them off when I decided to do that essay for my biology class about the working of their viruses. I don't think they'd want antidotes to be commercialized."

Playmaker's lip press together in a thin line and Ryoken stares at them longer than he should, memories of this morning coming back in a sudden

rush. When he looks up to meet his eyes, Playmaker breaks the eye contact, and Ryoken has to hold back a smirk at how *easy* it is, how easy *he* is.

“Are you sure it’s just that? Maybe someone you know is working for them, or against them,” Playmaker steps closer, lowering his voice, and Ryoken has to wonder if this interrogation is legal as well, but he doesn’t mind being this close to his body in that suit. He’s clearly trying to implicate things about Ryoken’s father, but his founding of a terrorist organization is buried just enough that a trust fund kid like Ryoken would never be able to find it, and he already made it so it appears as if he wasn’t really close to him before his death. Even Ryoken’s high school classmates would be able to confirm it, so Playmaker is taking a blind shot and missing the mark. “Any sort of connection would help.”

Ryoken stands up, which seems to take Playmaker by surprise because he takes a shaky step back to give him space, seemingly wary of his hurt leg, but Ryoken just slips his feet inside the slipper he was given since he couldn’t get his foot inside his shoe with how swollen it got and shoots Playmaker a half-confused, half-insulted look, pushing his acting skills as far as they will go in order to appear genuinely insulted.

“I don’t know a single person that would ever support terrorists, and that includes *me*,” he frowns, and a part of it is his own reaction at his lie. He’s worked for Hanoi, he’s helped them get to where they are, and if they managed to break him again, to take the opportunity Kyoko gave him and shatter it more than Ryoken himself has, he knows he would go back to being a shell of himself. If everything got taken from him— “I have no interest in any of this, to be honest, but there’s a reason I’m going to med school.”

Playmaker seems taken aback at his snap, and Ryoken wonders how long it’s been since he’s had a civilian not make heart eyes at him. He almost seems impressed, and Ryoken wants to lean in and down and lick his way into his mouth, grab his chin and tilt it up until his expression turns into something far less restrained, far less composed, because he always looks so good like that, and Ryoken’s self-control sometimes isn’t good enough to stop himself.

He doesn't, but he has to cross his arms to hide how hard he's clenched his fists.

"Alright. Will you be able to go home by yourself? Police are willing to escort." Is what Playmaker settles on, not even offering an apology. Ryoken guesses he's too used to him knowing stuff without him saying it, as if he's forgotten about trying to pretend he doesn't know him at all for a few seconds. "I could also escort you back—"

"I'm good, I'll have someone pick me up," Ryoken smiles, the gesture a bit tight, and he hopes Playmaker takes it as if Ryoken is trying to dismiss him, when in reality he just leaned his weight on his bad leg. He's going to have trouble driving like this, but he has no choice. Spectre knows not to come back. "Is that all?"

Something about his tone must be enough to help Playmaker decide that he's done trying to get something useful out of him. He's met with only a nod and an almost curious gaze, but Ryoken turns away from him and leaves without any more words, heading towards the police like he was told to do. He's asked again if he needs a ride home, and some officers try to imply they want to take him into custody for interrogation about his kidnapping, but Ryoken just waves them all off and claims to be too tired for that. He'll delete records of his name in regards to today from their database later.

He's still pissed that his attempt at making Soulburner and Playmaker leave him behind didn't work. He should have known, really, because they're too self-righteous to do something like leave an apparently kidnapped civilian alone, but it was worth the shot—well, not the literal shot, because Ryoken struggles to appear like he isn't holding back any physical cues of pain, like he isn't *limping*, but at least he's sure that they are still absolutely clueless about the importance of the Ignis. They might be starting to get an idea, but they're too behind in the game.

Ryoken is already three steps ahead of both them and Hanoi, anyways. Tomorrow, that should add up to four, if everything goes well.

He's looking forward to how the board will shift, now that Hanoi's made its move.

Ryoken lingers around the police, pretending to be waiting to be picked up, long enough for Playmaker to leave. They make eye contact as he does, but Ryoken doesn't offer any further acknowledgement, and instead his attention shifts towards the guy that shot him, now awake, sitting on the back of an empty ambulance, nursing a cup of hot tea. He makes sure no one is watching as he approaches and closes the ambulance doors, but they're distracted enough sorting out all the Hanoi members they caught and all the victims to not pay him any mind. This guy is way too shaken by suddenly regaining control of himself to do anything when Ryoken holds him down with his body weight, hard enough not to bruise, and presses the pillow he was given against his face until he stops moving.

He checks his pulse and lingers just enough to be sure, because doing this without breaking the neck is not something Ryoken likes to rely on. He arranges him in the same position he was in and waits for the right moment to slip away from the vehicle, going into the woods in order to take the shortcut to his house. He thought he would drive, but their rented van is now surrounded by police. It's fine.

He has a lot of work to get to.

Notes for the Chapter:

hope you liked it, and i'd like to hear your thoughts! this marks the end of the "first arc", so to say, and more exciting stuff should be coming soon. thank you for reading ❤

8. everyone looks worse in the light

Notes for the Chapter:

i did say this was coming soonish lol

Miyu watches the live transmission of the things going on in Den City's tourism-oriented mountain from her phone, earphones plugged in and the screen brightness hiked up to the max to be able to truly make out anything.

There are trees burning, and by now the earthquakes have stopped, for long enough for the police to go in and arrest the Hanoi members they found, and send in search and rescue services in case there were any civilians involved. Several Knights of Hanoi were found dead. The causes were undetermined as of right now—Playmaker has never killed anyone, and it's rare for people to die in an area that he's in. Miyu can imagine the reason for the deaths quite easily.

She stops listening after no more details are given by the press, looking around the street. It's packed with people, from evacuation being stopped halfway through being given directions to the nearest bunkers; she wouldn't be surprised if they thought that the events of Domino City were repeating themselves, with the ground suddenly shaking and law enforcement running around trying to guide people out of their homes. It's the reason there are even any bunkers around, after all.

She is, frankly and perhaps a bit selfishly, more concerned about Aoi than she is about anyone else. She can take care of herself, sure, but that didn't make the two hours she's been out there on civilian rescue any easier, nor did the pressure of not knowing what was truly going on. They were having a date night, because Aoi deserves a break after this morning, but now here Miyu is, standing outside her apartment building in her pajamas and resisting the urge to call her, because she knows she won't pick up until someone with any degree of real authority tells her she can go home.

Instead, Miyu wanders around and keeps up some bits of small talk with her neighbors before she's giving up, looking through her contact list for

someone to talk to that might actually give her some answers. Crossing her arms, Miyu stares at Ryoken's number and tries to decide whether this is any better than calling her girlfriend, considering the mountain's still on fire.

Knowing him, he's probably already gotten himself out of the situation, but she still hesitates, biting her lip and allowing herself to feel the chill of the breeze against her legs to ground herself in the moment, wondering if she truly wants to know or if she would prefer hearing Aoi's vanilla version of the events.

...she can deal with both.

With a sigh, Miyu taps her foot against the ground and hits the dial button, not removing her earphones. It rings and rings, one, two, three, four times—Ryoken never takes this long to answer the phone, so he's either already passed out or busy dealing with something else. She makes the decision to not bother him and wait 'till morning, but as soon as she blocks her phone she receives a call from Spectre, who isn't who she would prefer to talk to and get some comfort from, in all honesty, but he'll do as well.

She lets it ring for a few seconds before answering, moving away from the crowds as unsuspiciously as she can.

"Hey," she starts, a sigh following the sound. "Did Ryoken wreck his phone again?"

"Of course he did. The touch screen is shattered," Spectre pauses, either waiting for Miyu to take over or too tired to make this quick. She wouldn't be surprised if it were both. "Do you want the long version right now, or would you rather save your energy?"

"I don't think *my source* will tell me much," Miyu pulls her lips into a thin line, and Spectre makes a soft noise of agreement. "I'm guessing this is related to the reason Ryoken was being so borderline this morning."

"More so than usual," Spectre corrects, and Miyu can't help but agree. "Yes, it is related to that. We retrieved what we went looking for, with some

obstacles along the way, as you can probably tell. I'd like to disclaimer this by saying we're not responsible for the earthquakes—”

Miyu barks out a laugh, making a few heads turn her way, so she gives her back to them to hide her smirk. “Oh, you shouldn't have said anything about it. I knew almost nothing of your plan for today, despite Ryoken wanting me there, but he never mentioned that earthquakes were a possibility.”

“It was unexpected, but turned out better than it could have,” Spectre pauses, letting out his own sigh. “I almost got crushed by a boulder. Have some sympathy.”

“Sympathy? Do you have *any* idea where my girlfriend is right now?” Miyu allows her annoyance and anger from earlier seep into her tone, and can almost picture Spectre wincing at it. She should probably improve her temper, since she can go off like a firecracker if allowed, but he and Ryoken have always been able to take it. “She's helping up with *clean up*, when she should be with me, preferably taking a bubble bath while I give her a massage—”

There's suddenly rustling sounds coming from the other end of the line, and Ryoken's voice comes crystal clear through her phone, making her annoyance rise even further. “You have absolutely *no filter*—”

“I *will* fight you, damn you—”

“I think we all need to calm down,” Spectre interjects, and Miyu realizes she has probably been on speaker this whole time. That slimy little *shit*. “It's been a long day. Ryoken-sama is quite tired. Can't we talk about this tomorrow?”

“I'm not going anywhere with you tomorrow, I'll have you know,” Miyu runs a hair through her hair, trying not to pull at it in frustration. “Whatever you had planned that I might have agreed to can fuck right off if I don't get a proper explanation. This was about that Ignis thing, wasn't it?”

There's silence for a few seconds, which only fuels her fury, and she's about to snap at them some more before Ryoken speaks up, his voice soft and collected, yet there's no way he could have hidden that underlying tone of exhaustion, his words more paused than they usually are.

"It was. I told you we were going to pick something up, and we did, but then Hanoi showed up. They probably fixed the radar I wrecked," Ryoken takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, clearly relieved that Miyu hasn't trying to interrupt him yet. She knows it's hard for him to share this, but she's the one that's usually asking to be left in the dark and there's some things that she can't just let them get away with independently of her desire to not get involved. "To make it short, Spectre handled our target while I tried to lay low. I pretended to be Dr. Taki's hostage—"

"She was there?"

Miyu doesn't realize she said it out loud until after three seconds of silence, after which Ryoken continues. "I'll explain that part in depth... later. She helped me, to make it short. Playmaker and Soulburner were around, as always, but my identity wasn't compromised. Spectre was regarded as just another civilian that happened to be at the scene and slipped away easily enough. We are alright, and we're planning to move forward in retrieving the rest of Hanoi's targets."

Miyu closes her eyes and shakes her head, looking up at the night sky for a couple of seconds afterwards, an old familiar weight settling over her shoulders. "I had hoped you would have let go of this, you know? After you asked Yusaku out..."

She hears Ryoken take a deep breath and finds herself hurting for him, just a little. Most of it is overtaken by her frustration, her own pain and her sadness, how cold the weather gets with each minute that passes, but Ryoken has always been someone difficult to write off ever since she met him. He seemed to shine so bright only to crash just as brilliantly all on his own account, all the time. If she were a poet it would be far too easy to write about his tragedy.

“You know I can’t. No one would be safe if I did,” a pause, either because of exhaustion or because he can’t quite say what comes next without bracing himself for it. “You wouldn’t be safe. Neither would Spectre. I thought I could leave it six years ago too, but I was proven wrong. I’m sorry.”

Miyu curls her toes, pressing them against her sandals, and shrugs to herself, trying to hold onto her anger instead of letting the weight of his words drag her down. “You don’t have to apologize.”

“I ruined your night.” There seems to be the hint of a smile coming from Ryoken, with the way his voice lights up, just slightly. It doesn’t do much to improve her mood, but it does make her shake her head again in exasperation. “Please come with me tomorrow. I’ll make it up to you, give Spectre a break. I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do—mostly.”

“You know, sometimes you’re awfully romantic,” Miyu snorts, rolling her eyes, already picturing the smirk growing on Ryoken’s lips and matching it. “Too bad we are taken, right?”

“I’m *not* taken.”

“Sure thing, lover boy,” Miyu looks around and spots a police car approaching, immediately frowning at the sight. “Alright, I think we are about to let back inside. I’ll go with you to whatever you want to do, but only because I want to have the weekend to hang out with Aoi, got it?”

“The weekend’s busier for those *commercial* heroes—”

“Fuck off—both of you.” Miyu hangs him up without as much as a proper goodbye, and listens with half an ear to the information the officers that step out of the car gather every resident around to hear, relieved when she’s allowed to go back inside her apartment.

She heads straight for her bathroom and dejectedly stares at the candles she had put out early, at her wireless stereo, the fancy fragrances she bought to use in the bath tonight, feeling like her life turns into a joke every time she wants to act normal. She had intended to ignore Ryoken’s antics as much as

possible tonight, trusting him to not fuck up, especially with Spectre around, but clearly something big blew up in that mountain, and it probably wouldn't shape up to be any good.

With a sigh, Miyu stretches and decides to not let her effort go to waste, turning on the hot water to get the bath to fill while she turned the candles back on – aromatic, all of them, and Aoi's favorite scents to boot – and set up the playlist she had in mind to chill with her girlfriend, only going out of the bathroom quickly to fetch the strawberries she thought she would not get to eat.

Aoi loves them, and Miyu bothered to order a bunch from her favorite farm, but it seemed like she would have to refrigerate them for her to have later, after she's gotten her fill.

She undresses and settles into the warm water with a wince, immediately leaning back until she's neck deep and the steam curls her hair, held up by a lazy bun. She keeps her arms and hands free from touching any water in order to be able to eat, and scroll through her phone without worrying about dropping anything, ignoring the voice of worry in the back of her mind.

There's nothing online that's not coverage on the mountain incident, but Miyu focus her attention on the civilian relief efforts, feeling between conflicted and happy at seeing the love Aoi is getting for popping in to help despite how hard her morning was. There's far more talk about Playmaker and Soulburner sightings, someone claiming Playmaker took their bike, but Miyu can't find it in herself to care about any of what's being reported, only partly because of how much she wishes none of this were a thing.

She used to live in Den City's now self-proclaimed suburbs, where there were only private schools and restaurants and maybe a fancy hotel or two, and a communal pool. Her mother refused to let her out alone for years, even when she was in high school, and they even moved houses so Miyu didn't have to walk for too long by herself on her way to the station. It was old, justified paranoia and fear that kept her sheltered and out of her right mind for years, up until she decided she wasn't having it anymore and moved out to go to college in the city and live on campus.

Her mother only allowed it because Miyu threatened to run away, and she would have done so without a doubt in her mind if it came to that. Ryoken was a big part of it as well; her mother dreamed of a fancy, traditional wedding the second she graduated from high school, three children, her life as a housewife, and Ryoken was her favorite victim, probably under the belief that he would also lock her up in her bedroom if she wanted to go out and have fun by herself from time to time.

Needless to say, their relationship's been strained since, and Miyu's been threatened to be cut off several times, but her mother doesn't dare risk that she doesn't make it to graduation. She cares too much about status to stand for something like that, now that she's started college and stumbled her way through to get where she is today.

But Den City itself is so *loud*, she had so much trouble adjusting at first, not out of a lack of confidence but rather the abundance of freedom. There was always something going on in campus, always a party that she got invited to by her swimming teammates, and she struggled not to get swept up by it while hiding things that if anyone were to know, would completely shut her out from the fragile sense of normalcy she had found.

This was, of course, until she met Aoi, and it was like everything made sense for once.

She remembered her quite clearly from her childhood, the memory by now deeply integrated in her mind to the point Miyu wouldn't forget about it even if she tried. Aoi hasn't been nearly as responsive or friendly as Miyu had been at the start, but she couldn't blame her when the first impression she got from her after so many years was her uncontrollably sobbing, on Ryoken's lap, nursing a beer bottle, during a party she can't even remember the host of.

Despite that, their relationship skyrocketed not too long after, and then Miyu was brave enough to tell her truth once Aoi trusted her with hers, and while her mother was not happy about it, Miyu couldn't really bring herself to care when she was nothing short of thrilled Maybe moving out from campus into Aoi's wasn't the best idea at the start, because that only

provoked her mom even further, but other than that there were no disadvantages.

Except for nights like this, of course, when Aoi put her own need to impress her brother and herself before their relationship. She can't truly be angry, but she's dangerously close to disappointed every time Aoi cancels a date on her for the sake of keeping someone from robbing a bank, or Hanoi from kidnapping the members of the city hall, like half of them don't deserve a little scare.

She expected it to be a little bit different, is all, and even though they're living together now, it feels like Miyu sees her at campus more than at home, often waking up alone in the early morning or in the middle of the night to watch Aoi struggle to stay awake long enough to eat something before going to bed. It was enough of a pattern that Miyu wasn't surprised today, when Aoi stood her up for lunch, and she wasn't surprised when she received a text shortly after the earthquakes started that said she would be late.

Her phone vibrating on her hand startles her, and she almost drops it in the water because of it as well, too distracted with her own thoughts. She unlocks it to see it's just a text message from Ryoken detailing where they're going and what she should bring since it might apparently take a few hours, but she doesn't bother reading it and instead aggressively takes a bite out of a strawberry, not caring that the juice drips down her chin and into the bath water.

By now, she's been soaking for what, for a normal human, would be too long, but Miyu finds it relaxing, even if it's gotten a bit cold. She could heat it up a bit, but as she slides further down the tub until her nose and ears and half her head are underwater, she finds that she doesn't mind it quite like this for a little while longer.

Closing her eyes, Miyu listens to the illusion of silence underwater, neither the pressure nor the lack of oxygen not being an issue for her. It's not exactly the most natural thing for her—she's avoided it for a long time, so she doesn't dare pull too much at that strange part of herself, that confusing connection, but it's still nice to be surrounded by water as if she was born at

sea, a lost siren on ground. Reality is much grimmer, considering how she didn't ask for this, but Miyu likes to pretend, sometimes, that everything is fine and everything will be alright and none of this will ever make her life more difficult.

She drifts for so long that she's struggling to remain conscious and aware; she's fallen asleep in the tub before and while she's not in any danger from it, it's rather odd to wake up afterwards and breath in air, but she is just a little tired, mostly on an emotional level as it often happens of late, so she thinks a little nap might not hurt.

That, of course, is when the bathroom door opens without her noticing and someone dips their hand into the tub to grab her shoulder. Miyu screams, fight or flight instinct kicking in, but hands grab at her and pull her out of the water until Miyu is reaching out blindly and wrapping one hand tightly around—oh, it's Aoi.

Miyu stares, her chest heaving, as Aoi winces and wraps her own hand around Miyu's wrist, subtly trying to get her to let go of her throat. "Hi, there."

"Oh, fuck." Miyu says, the situation finally processing in her brain, dropping her hand from her hold and pressing it against her forehead, closing her eyes. "Shit, I'm sorry. You scared me."

"It's fine. I should have said something," Aoi shoots her a tight smile, shrugging sheepishly, and Miyu takes the chance to take her in with a critical eye, not feeling disoriented anymore; how her chestnut hair is in place, her face devoid of make-up, her clothes from early today barely ruffled. SOL always makes sure to strip any traces of Blue Angel off Aoi after her work is done. She's not allowed to have any of Blue Angel's belongings at her place, including her variety of suits, and it sometimes feels like Miyu isn't loving Aoi in all she is, because she carries on two lives that literally can't ever cross each other at all. "Have you been waiting long?"

Her voice brings Miyu out of her pensive state, and she finds it in herself to force a smile, shaking her head and shrugging, before reaching out to hold

Aoi's face with one palm, caressing her cheek and trying to push any other thoughts away from her mind. "A bit. I had a fun evening planned for us, but—well, duty calls."

Aoi swallows visibly, the corner of her mouth twitching downwards before she's leaning in to plant a kiss on Miyu's lips, soft and inoffensive, yet with a deep feeling of longing behind it that sends a pained shiver down her spine.

"I'm sorry about today," Aoi whispers, pressing her forehead against Miyu and closing her eyes. Miyu stares at the bags under them, dark with exhaustion, and leans in herself to press a kiss on the corner of her mouth, wanting to do nothing more than pull her in and wrap her in blankets and not let her out for a week, but she knows that would be hypocritical, and patronizing, and that she wouldn't appreciate it, much like she didn't appreciate her overbearing mother doing the same. "So much stuff happened and I kept getting called. I'm sorry."

"Hey, it's alright," Miyu mumbles, lips brushing the skin of Aoi's cheeks, and creates some space between them in order to look at her properly and make eye contact, once more forcing her smile to reach her eyes. "Wanna relax? I can heat up the water and give you a massage."

Aoi's lazy smile makes Miyu's heart flutter, and the hesitant nod that follows it make her let out the breath she feels like she's been holding all day. As she drains the tub to fill it up again with hot water, Aoi undresses, casually telling her about all the stuff she did as if she just got off from her shift at a part-time job, which she was, but Miyu doesn't think Aoi thinks of what she does as work, but as a right.

Akira doesn't exactly like Miyu for various valid reasons, the fact that Aoi broke her NDA for her and their relationship being the main one, but he also didn't like how she was openly against commercializing vigilante work, and selling Blue Angel as a product when the stuff she did, so different from what *Ryoken* and Yusaku did, and what Go Onizuka popularized, wasn't nowhere near as fulfilling as if could be, if it all weren't based on handing Aoi whatever she needed and telling her what to do.

Not work, in Miyu's eyes, and not a real call for justice, as much as it is a semi-realized dream. She is the biggest Blue Angel supporter, but sometimes, Miyu thinks she's her harsher critic as well, and Aoi is in the middle of it and letting herself be stringed along, because she isn't brave enough to tell her brother what *she* is going to do—or rather, what she *wants* to do but never does. Aoi's come to think of this whole thing as something she's owed at best, and something she has to put up with at worse, and Miyu thinks Akira might regret it, a little, if only because of how much it's dragging Aoi down.

These thoughts pop up bitterly in the back of Miyu's mind, and are to be left to boil there until she's able to let it out, either with Ryoken or with Spectre, because these aren't things she can say to Aoi when she's working herself to the ground every waking moment. She knows there will be a day for it, but that isn't today, and she wonders if any of that petty bitterness and disappointment is in any way visible as Aoi talks, and talks, and Miyu listens, helps her relax, hands steady on her shoulders as she leans against her chest.

She tells Aoi about her plans to hang out with Ryoken come tomorrow, swallows the negative feelings down, and receives a little jealous groan as a response that makes her giggle, until it's time to go to bed and Aoi is pulling her closer, kissing her goodnight.

She decides it doesn't really matter if Aoi does notice it. It only matters that she speaks her mind—later, when her lips don't taste like strawberries and her arms around her aren't causing her to drift into sleep.

“Are you *limping*? ”

It's about nine a.m. and Miyu is definitely not awake nor prepared enough to go mountain climbing with Ryoken. She receives a glare for her outburst, but it lacks any real heat as Ryoken sits down in front of her, and calls for a waiter to take his order of creamy sweet tooth-rotting coffee and a bagel. Miyu's already eating because she was told not to wait, but it doesn't keep her from hungrily staring at Ryoken until he has no other choice but to order an extra one. Quick metabolism is a curse, sometimes, and Ryoken

burns at least fourth times more calories than she does, but he handles his food better, like the lovely neat freak he is.

They barely exchange any words until the waiter leaves, and Ryoken, of course, goes to defend himself first thing. “I got shot, alright? With *special* bullets.”

“You *drove* here, Ryoken,” Miyu rolls her eyes and brings her black coffee up to her lips, offering Ryoken a thin grin as his nose wrinkles at the potent smell of it. “I guess I’m driving us, because there’s no way I’ll be your passenger when you’re visibly limping.”

“It doesn’t even ache.” Ryoken taps his fingers against the table, and Miyu leans on her elbows to get a closer look at his eyes, just in case. Ryoken notices and immediately throws her yet another glare. “No, I’m not using painkillers, *thanks for asking*.”

Miyu opens her mouth to ask him what else should she expect, but Ryoken is faster than her and pulls out a brand new phone from his pocket, opening a planner app, before she can even get a word in. “We need to be at Stardust Road in an hour to be ahead of schedule.”

“You’re treating this like we’re going on a beach trip,” Miyu mumbles, spying at the list Ryoken holds and squinting her eyes at the little notes in order to see well. “What do you *mean* we’re deep-diving?”

“*You* are deep-diving. I did tell you to bring a swim suit with you.” He answers, gesturing at the bikini top under her crop-top, like that justifies anything about this at all. “Don’t worry, that part will not last long, but we do have to climb a high-rise rock structure on the outskirts of Stardust Road, right where the beach meets the mountain. There’s no other way to access the underwater cave without altering the place or drawing attention to ourselves, or taking twice the time.”

Miyu has quite a few protests that want to be let out from behind her lips, but she holds her tongue, because it’s already too late and she *did* agree to this. She was warned it might take a few hours, but she wasn’t exactly

expecting rock-climbing followed by scuba-diving. At least it was going to be fun, if Ryoken could manage to wipe that frown off his face.

“Right. What has you all grumpy, anyways?” The waiter chooses that moment to drop off Ryoken’s breakfast, and Miyu immediately grabs the extra bagel and the cream cheese. Ryoken wrinkles his nose at her after thanking the waiter, as if she was a child who just threw up on herself a little, probably at her words. “Hard night? I can’t imagine that limping is the result of *fun times*, when it’s you.”

Ryoken shoots her a dirty look, but it’s dulled by the huff of breath that follows it, and how he’s partially hiding a slight smirk behind his coffee cup. “A tree fell on me and then I got shot. I would say that’s good enough fun for you.”

Miyu rolls her eyes and gazes at him with a critical eye, taking it how messy his hair looks, fluffy yet not properly combed, and how he’s holding himself tight like a string being pulled. It’s clear that stress is eating him up already, and worry flares inside Miyu, that she swallows down with a bite of her bagel and a sip of her coffee.

“Well, you’re far more awful at lying than I remember you being a few days ago,” she says, her voice low so only Ryoken can properly catch it, and it somehow makes him look even tenser. “What is it, really? Doing life endangering things is about normal for you.”

Ryoken’s lips curl downwards, his eyes narrowing slightly, and it’s too familiar of a look, so when he offers no response, Miyu pushes a little bit more, pressing her foot against one of his under the table, hoping he won’t shut down on her. Keeping her voice soft but demanding is a good trick, one Ryoken seems to fall to only out of respect for her and little else, and so she exploits it in this moment, since Ryoken hasn’t told her to knock it off.

“Is it Yusaku?”

Ryoken uncomfortably straightens up, his face darkening ever so slightly before he’s pulling himself together, sipping on his coffee before even opening his mouth to answer. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Miyu scoffs, shaking her head. “And you think you have a choice with me?”

Ryoken levels her with a look that screams he’s rather annoyed at the question, yet knows she has a point. His expression only lightens when his face is overcome with a smirk, bringing his mug up to his lips again as he speaks. “Why don’t you tell me about Zaizen, instead? Have you talked to her?”

Miyu wants to tell him to fuck off, as she often does do, but the reminder of it makes her frown, bearing barely any difference from a pout. There’s no one else that really knows all of Miyu’s truth but Ryoken and Spectre, so she doesn’t shy away from talking to them about her feelings because, frankly, she learned a thing or two during therapy about emotional support, and not only did she lack it at times, but she knew Spectre and Ryoken only had each other.

Well, Ryoken could have someone else if he didn’t refuse to take her advice and picked up his phone, pressed a little hard. That date invite, she’s starting to think, was a fluke.

“I don’t want to talk to her about it yet,” Miyu rest the side of her face against her palm, leaning on the table and groaning softly. “It’s so delicate and I already have issues with her brother. At least I don’t completely ignore the issue like *you* do though.”

As eloquent as always, Ryoken’s only answer is to flip his middle finger at her.

Ryoken pays for their breakfast as a gesture of peace, or maybe as his own unique, indirect way of apologizing about what he’s about to put her through over the next few hours, and actually lets her drive as well. He doesn’t look anywhere near happy about it, even as he brings his hurt leg up to rest above the glove compartment. Miyu pulls back his pant leg just to get a look at it and visibly winces in sympathy at how dark the bruise is.

“They got you good, huh?”

“It was a good shot,” Ryoken pauses, staring at the purple skin around his ankle and fading up his leg. The most he could be hurt, as far as she knew. “He saw my face, though. He’s dead.”

Miyu’s blood runs cold and her foot hesitates on the accelerator, before she’s shaking herself and pulling from the parking place Ryoken put the car in. She remains quiet throughout, trying to keep her breath steady, but Ryoken turns to stare out the window with tense shoulders and Miyu immediately knows she’s been too obvious.

The idea of death bothers Miyu in a way that seems to come from deep inside her bones, something that she might have not been born with but certainly developed with time. She’s queasy about open wounds and brutality, and a part of it probably comes because of how much destruction she could cause on her own, if she got just a little angry. She had an outburst yesterday, what with that water bottle snapping because Yusaku teased her a little too long, and she constantly has to remind herself that water can be as beautiful as it can be terrifying.

She finds her balance again after a little while, and speaks perhaps way too low and careful to be able to pretend she didn’t get affected by that comment. “When are you going to be satisfied, Ryoken? After you get revenge?”

“You know it’s not as simple revenge. I almost wish it was,” he points out, but there’s no real feeling behind it; it makes her feel a little uncomfortable, but then again she’s uncomfortable about even participating in this kind of thing, even knowing Ryoken is the one that’s, most of the time, in the right. “It might end tomorrow or it might take years, but all of their members are literally and figuratively brainwashed enough that no one can ever be safe, much less so you, or Fujiki, or Spectre.”

“That’s noble and all, but not what I asked. What about *you*?” Miyu licks her lips and risks a glance out of the corner of her eye at Ryoken, taking in how tense he is and gesturing with her head at his uncovered bruise while continuing. “What will you do when Hanoi is dead and gone, considering that’s all you’ve been living for?”

Ryoken's breath audibly catches in his throat, and his answer comes out with a dry, humorless laugh. "I have no idea."

Takeru's alarm clock wakes him up at his usual set time for his morning shift at Café Nagi, and he reaches blindly for it with his right hand, not moving any other muscle, a confused groan leaving his mouth and being muffled against his pillow when all he finds is air. He finally lifts his head only to see that he is not in fact in his own shitty rental apartment, but in Yusaku and Kusanagi-san's place, lying on Yusaku's bed, empty but for him and the bed sheets, no alarm clock to his right but rather to his left, because it's Yusaku's and not his own.

With another loud groan, Takeru buries his head in his borrowed pillow and allows memories from yesterday to come back to the forefront of his mind, his nose aching with the swing he took and his head pounding mercilessly. He vaguely recalls leaving with Playmaker *on foot*, because *of course* the police couldn't be nice for once and at least get them to the train station or whatever, and *of course* Playmaker would have said no to the idea anyways, but they could at least pretended to care for the two guys that handled the situation.

He doesn't remember much of his arrival to this place other than Kusanagi-san saying something about Jin and Dr. Taki and some other bullshit Takeru was too tired to even think about, and if memory serves him right he just pushed his way into Yusaku's room, stripped, and fell asleep right there and then the moment his head hit the pillow. He thinks he asked for permission and Yusaku said something about having a talk with Ai and sleeping on Kusanagi-san's room, since he has a bigger bed, but a little bit of guilt trickles in at how he basically took over Yusaku's room without much questioning.

Takeru finally manages to gather enough will to stand up, and his whole body protests with the movement even as he blindly follows the smell of scrambled eggs to the kitchen, where Kusanagi-san is serving up a plate for Jin, who looks like he had a bit of a rough night, in his own way.

“Feeling okay?” Kusanagi-san asks, offering him a rather tight smile that Takeru struggles to return, shrugging and wincing as he sits down beside Jin, feeling like his whole body is a big bruise. “Yusaku went out to get groceries. Tried to stop him but he insisted he was fine.”

Kusanagi-san shakes his head as he says it, and Takeru can understand why; Yusaku’s pain tolerance is crazy high, but he suspects it might be because he forces it to be. “Should I go looking for him?”

“He should be back in a bit,” Jin chimes in, leaning into Takeru’s space to whisper. “I think he just wanted to speak to Ai privately again, though, so we might actually not see him in hours.”

“We do need some milk,” Kusanagi-san says, shooting Jin a look that signals how he doesn’t find the idea amusing, but a frown forms over his brow as he turns back towards the stove, grabbing an egg and cracking it open over a pan, the sounds of sizzling filling the room. A sigh forces itself from Kusanagi-san’s lips as he stirs the egg, and he speaks up only when he seems to be sure they won’t burn and turns around to face them again. “I’m definitely worried about him, though. Yesterday was intense.”

“It was a fucking nightmare,” Takeru shakes his head, stretching his arm over Jin’s plate in order to grab a slice of bread. He takes a bite and chews at it rapidly, propping his chin his palm. “I feel for him as well, though. Must not be easy to suddenly have a baby...”

“Is he even a baby?” Jin asks, and tries to grab at Takeru’s bread instead of taking a slice for himself. As a response, Takeru just lightly slaps his hand away and takes another big bite, chewing obnoxiously and making Jin scrunch up his nose at him purposely leaving his mouth open. “I mean, he seems pretty capable. Almost beat me at Mario Kart.”

“Who knows, really?” Kusanagi-san shakes his head in what looks like parental anxiety, the apron he’s wearing only enchanting the look. “Well, Revolver probably does, but if they’re having a lover’s quarrel again...”

“That’s *still* happening?” Jin rolls his eyes, not particularly baffled by now. Takeru has to agree with the sentiment; he just doesn’t understand why it’s

so difficult for Yusaku to be honest with himself and for Revolver to be honest *in general*.

He doesn't have much of an opinion on Revolver other than he's a cryptic asshole who dresses like he *wants* to be accused of villainy, and insists on them just sitting put while he handles Hanoi. He doesn't see the appeal of him beyond his... physical prowess, and even that Takeru can't really wrap his head around. There's obviously a connection between them; Takeru would have to be deaf and blind to not notice that they get along, but Yusaku also gets along with Kogami Ryoken, who at least seems nice and backhandedly complimented his skill with sports *once*. That's already better than anything Revolver's done, except for saving his life a couple times, but he's always *doing that* anyways.

"I don't get it," Takeru shrugs, chewing on his last bits of bread. "I think he rejected a date from Kogami as well—"

"*He did?*"

"Alright, I don't think discussing Yusaku's love life – or *lack* of one – will get us anywhere with—what did Revolver call Ai?" Kusanagi-san chimes in, an edge of disapproval to his voice. Jin rolls his eyes again, because he has *an attitude* during the mornings, to which his brother points at him with the spatula he was using to stir the eggs. "Don't roll your eyes at me, I'll cut back your snack fund—"

"I think he called it Ignis," Takeru stands up and stretches again, holding back a yawn and wincing at the sound of his bones popping. He needs approximately a *month* of undisturbed sleep in order to be able to regain the feeling of being alive. He regrets not being a coffee addict like Yusaku. "Eh, we can worry about it when he gets here. I came across this weird dude in the mountain as well and I want to double check he's fine because I left him alone, but I'm gonna take a shower first."

Kusanagi-san waves him off with a grunt, the smell of eggs being slowly overcooked filling the kitchen as Takeru leaves them both and heads to the bathroom, already daydreaming about a nice, long, hot shower and

spending the day lazing around. He has stuff to do for a few classes, but he's honestly considering dropping out entirely more and more as of late.

Admittedly, he was never truly attached to the idea of getting a degree. It just wasn't for him, in the way people know that they shouldn't date that one person but they do it anyways because life's short, only to regret it a few months later when they're too knee-deep to leave unscathed. He could have stayed home and come, eventually, to the same conclusion as he is right now, but he finds that he likes Den City, and he likes the friends he's made here and, well, he might have moved using Yusaku's existence as an excuse, but he knew that somewhere or someday he would find the real reason why his gut feeling told him to pack up and leave his grandparents.

This would be a perhaps depressing thought for many, but not really for him, and he can almost immediately picture the momentary disappointment on his grandparent's faces, but they would understand, eventually, willingly or not giving him the space and time he needed in order to let him make his own choices. He should pay them a visit sometime, when the city's not as on metaphorical fire as it seems to be right now, but he'd need to pull more shifts to buy a train ticket without them noticing it—

Takeru's thoughts get interrupted in the middle of him taking off his underwear when he hears the shifts of metal and a sudden heaviness in the air. He's immediately alert, opening a crack of the bathroom door and looking out into the apartment for a moment to check it's not coming from outside, but as soon as he does that there's another groan of metal, and he realizes with slow-dawning horror that it's coming from the shower.

He has about five seconds of quiet to think because more noises come, and he wonders for a fraction of those if maybe they should be calling the landlord to check there aren't rats running around the plumbing – it is a rather nasty, old building – but he doesn't get too far down that line of thought because the sound comes again, louder now, and Takeru finds himself between panicked and scared before he's reaching for the shower's knobs and turning them on, in hopes of getting whatever's in the tubes unstuck.

He's hit right in the face instead, not only with water, but with black goo and—

Oh, there goes breakfast, he thinks, because he *will not* be able to eat after this, if he survives, his stomach churning as a strong headache suddenly rears up inside his head, and the goo falls from his face onto the floor, slowly, disgustingly adding up as more and more of it comes from the showerhead. He thinks he hears Jin or Kusanagi-san calling his name outside, but Takeru's too horrified to respond.

The goo starts taking a rather familiar shape and his the bread he ate now threatens, for real, to escape out of his mouth, because he's just *not at all* prepared for sudden weird-looking paste to shift until the vague shape of an eye *blinks* at him, and a voice echoes inside his head, sending shivers down his spine.

"Homura Takeru," it says, and continues, but Takeru's too busy shrieking to hear the rest.

He just wanted to take a fucking shower.

To Miyu, Ryoken seems relieved that none of his plans for the day have gone off the rails as of yet.

They have already done most of the climbing involved, and from this little alcove of uneven yet solid rock formation sticking from the mountain, she can hear the sound of running water. Most of their climbing was done sideways; they started at the edge of the beach, at the bottom of Ryoken's property, and slowly made their way from there, Ryoken letting Miyu go first to direct her best and in case she fell.

It was quite a view from here, mostly of the ocean and, if she turned a little bit right, of some sand and rocks, waves hitting the shore. They were high up enough for the wind to be a little more violent than the weather implies with the heavy, humid heat that has fallen over Den City over the last few weeks, and while the sun was shining just as brightly and hitting them almost directly, because there weren't really many shadows to hide under,

Miyu found it strangely comforting. It's probably the far-away sound of waves, the smell of seawater, sand and earth, the lack of the usual city sounds that only seem to make everyone more stressed, how shiny the ocean water looks from this high up, and how the clear blue color of the sky seems to melt into it in the middle.

She would give everything to bring Aoi here on a date, honestly, and while it wasn't impossible, the reasons as to why she was here were soured this place for her.

"How did you even find this place?" Miyu asks, turning her sunglasses-covered eyes from the ocean to Ryoken, who's quietly sitting beside her and seemingly enjoying the view as well. He barely stirs at the question, a tiny twitch of his shoulders being the only indicator that he heard it, but he still takes a few seconds to answer, tilting his head as if in thought.

"Pure luck, I think," he starts, his voice so uncharacteristically mild and calm that it almost carries away with the wind. "I did used to rock climb a lot, when I could, so I remembered this place when I needed it the most. It certainly wasn't easy to get here when I was sixteen, though."

"Do you think... that anything would have happened to you if you fell off?" The question slips form Miyu's lips, not completely against her will, but rather with some hesitancy.

Ryoken turns his head towards her at the question, seemingly surprised, but answers easily enough. "Maybe. I can't be certain. I don't think I would have died, but I would have probably been in a lot of pain. If I fell off here right now, or higher, I would probably break a couple bones, but I don't think much else."

The nonchalant way in which he says it sits wrong inside Miyu, but she's come to expect it from him by this point. It's a wonder how Ryoken seems to be able to embrace those facts about him usually without hiccup, so different from the way that Miyu usually avoids her own that it makes her question how they're even still friends, with such colliding views regarding some things. Logically, she knows that most of their differences come from circumstance, and she respects Ryoken for being upfront – with her, at least,

most of the time – about his thoughts, his logic and his strategies, when Miyu's willing to listen.

She thinks about what it would feel like to live so unapologetically, but she can't quite grasp the image. It makes her picture Aoi, how she lives a lie despite almost by all means having a right to be honest about herself, because of how much she *loves* what she does but can't, and not for the first time Miyu wonders if she should really be judging her girlfriend, her brother, Ryoken's lifestyle, because how is any of that different from how Miyu pretends her childhood never happened? How is deciding that a fabricated concept of normalcy that's as fragile as glass any better than just straight up signing her identity away, or making yourself into someone different from who you are for the sake of not being found out?

"Hey," Ryoken calls, pulling Miyu out of her thoughts, and while he doesn't look particularly concerned about her spacing out, there's a tightness to his jaw, a stiffness to his shoulders, that wasn't there before. "Are you still alright with this?"

Miyu takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and forces herself to nod, to shoot Ryoken a reassuring smile that he doesn't seem to believe for a second, before standing up, stretching her back. "Sure, I'm just doing you a favor. We should go now, right?"

Ryoken's expression stays tight, but he doesn't argue, despite clearly seeing through her weak efforts at lying. Here's the thing: to her own displeasure, Miyu's always been pretty good at seeing through lies, and as a consequence, it's made her able to see through her very self, upon the layers of lies and excuses she's made up for herself in the years she lived with her mother in order to cope. They are fragile lies, non-reliable, that would crumble at the slightest amount of pressure put on them, but ones she doesn't quite know how to live without. She feels like a hypocrite, hating the way Aoi lives, that Ryoken lives, that even Yusaku lives, when she's doing the same thing.

The only difference is that she's not making herself useful through those lies, the way she sees it, and she doesn't really want to.

They climb for about ten more minutes before they make it to a caved-in rock formation, the rock beneath her hands becoming humid enough to confirm where the water is coming from. A bit of it slips out of the entrance, if Miyu can call it that, a mock of a waterfall that would make it into the ocean if it weren't for the way the cave is shaped. Ryoken seems to grip harder, the water making it more slippery for him, but Miyu finds it easy to finish her ascent and hold on to the edge of the entrance tight before pulling herself up slowly, leaning on her strength and balance to bring her legs up and then successfully sink into water.

It's unexpectedly deep, the level reaching up to her ribcage as her feet touch the foil underneath, but Miyu only takes a few seconds to shiver at the chilly temperature inside the cave before turning to help Ryoken up. He miscalculates by grabbing onto the edge of the entrance too hard, accidentally tearing off a piece of rock and almost losing his balance, but Miyu just grabs his wrist and pulls him in as hard as she can, sudden momentum making Ryoken go easily and having him land almost on top of her, chest to chest, only her quick reflexes keeping him from sinking them down by way of her instincts kicking in, the water bending to her will and keeping Ryoken afloat.

They stare at each other for a few seconds, and he's the first to crack, his dead serious expression shifting to a wince. "Can you let up? I can't move."

Miyu immediately does so, letting out a quick breath from deep within her chest, bringing a hand to her face and shaking her head. "You gave me a heart attack."

"It's been a while since I've been here." Is Ryoken's only excuse, but at the very least, he brings a hand up to her shoulder, squeezing in comfort. "Hey, I would have been fine."

"Broken bones is *not* fine," Miyu rolls her eyes, crosses her arms and levels him with a look. Ryoken looks unaffected and moves forwards, not even shivering at the coolness of the water. There's what could pass as a waterfall on the opposite side of the cave entrance, running down to what appears to be a deeper water formation, at least three times as big as this one.

There's no solid ground that isn't currently beneath their feet at sight, and the water's made the air inside heavy with moisture, the cave walls humid as the rock soaks, almost all of it covered in coral and sponges, little fish swimming, undisturbed, between her ankles. The light coming in from the entrance reflects on the water and gives everything a rather lovely blue-ish shine, and she catches the way it prettily brings out Ryoken's eyes.

Sudden heartbreak, because she feels too deeply, makes her wonder what Kogami Kiyoshi felt, watching his beautiful kid grow and making at some point the conscious decision to try to ruin him, but she pushes the anger away, decides to ignore those thoughts for now. Ryoken looks as much at home as she feels, as the adrenaline of almost watching him fall fades, and she finds that she can't be angry at him for being so reckless for long. It's pitiful, really, but that's what happens when people live under your skin, and take root down to your bone marrow.

"It's beautiful in here," Miyu sighs, wiggling her feet as the water shifts with the fishes. "I'll overlook the decisions of your younger self for now, for the sake of enjoying the view."

She can't see it, exactly, because Ryoken's head is turned mostly away from her, but she can tell he's raising one perfect eyebrow. "There's fish in here. And sponge."

"So?" Miyu shrugs, looks around away because it is truly a breathtaking, peace-inducing sight inside here. She notices that a line of water is bleeding on the wall from the dirt in between some rocks at the far left side of the pond, and a grin breaks out from her lips. "Hey, help me up here, will you?"

Ryoken turns towards her, unamused. "What?"

Miyu just grabs his shoulder and manhandles him to stand in front of the bleeding water, facing the wall, and he goes without protest, but he's clearly not too happy with it. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up, you owe me one because of that scare and this is the less I could ask for." Miyu's grin widens at Ryoken's spluttering response of '*that—that wasn't even a big deal!*' and makes him crouch, which results in some more

offended spluttering. She sits on his shoulders, trying to be quick because Ryoken's fully underwater now, and pulls at his hair to signal him to stand up after settling in. She almost hits her head on the ceiling, but she wouldn't have been able to reach before. "Hey! You could be more careful."

"What are you even *doing*?" Is Ryoken's answer, and Miyu just snorts at him, patting his head as one would do when a cat is being particularly dumb or stubborn, but still cute. "You know, I was trying to get you to notice something before—"

"Really? You're awful at foreshadowing then," Miyu brings her hands towards the water source, and digs her fingers into the dirt. It's mostly ineffective, so she digs harder, and then just pulls at *the water* instead because she's going to get nowhere with just her hands, and there's a low 'pop!' as a big air bubble disappears and the water starts running freely. Ryoken is tense under her, but becomes even more so when he sees she's cleared the obstruction that probably kept the water level low enough not to spill over the edge of the entrance they came through. "Honestly, Ryoken, if you'd told me back in high school that you were this uncomfortable between my legs, we could have avoided *a lot* of awkwardness."

He drops her backwards into the water, which is fair.

When she breaks the surface, a silly grin on her lips, Ryoken's glaring at her with no real heat, but all of the offended air he can fill his aura with. It makes him look, when paired with the wet hair, like a cat trying to retain dignity after a particularly dumb jump. "There wasn't fish in here the last time I was here. Or coral. Or sponge."

Miyu hums and heads towards the edge of the pond, looking downwards at the bigger one. It might be a four, maybe five meters fall, one they can pull without issues, but she's admittedly worried about how much light from the outside reaches down there. She was not cursed with full underwater sight, unfortunately. "So?"

"How did they form?"

A sprinkle of theories pop up inside Miyu's head, her major seemingly coming in handy, but they all seem unlikely. Most of the ponds or water formations inside mountains aren't this large or deep, and are at a level closer to the ground, near a natural entrance, so it is always unlikely that sea life forms in them without any help from external forces, like fish or turtles migrating from other areas through them being connected to rivers or the ocean itself. It is... odd, to say the least, that there's this many sponges, several tiny coral formations, small fish, and probably enough bacteria in the water to keep them fed.

"Well," Miyu says, cautiously, because Ryoken looks like he knows the answer but is simultaneously doubting it. "This might be connected to the ocean. It's a bit high up for that, but this cave does seem deep—but you already knew that, didn't you?"

Ryoken shrugs. "There's an entrance from underwater, that we could have probably used, but it would have taken three times what it took us to climb. In all my years coming here before, I never noticed any of... this."

He gestures to the water around them, and Miyu hums again. "You said that you left something here last time. What we're looking for."

"An Ignis. I—" Ryoken pauses and walks over, looking over the edge at the deeper pond. "It's down there. I knew it would form a cocoon off the environment but I didn't think it would perhaps have other side effects."

"That's..." Miyu sighs, shaking her head. "Fascinating, honestly."

Ryoken doesn't seem to think so, but he doesn't say anything else. He gestures towards the pond and Miyu raises an eyebrow at him. His immediate eye roll is much too satisfying.

"I did tell you that *you* are doing to deep-dive. I think it would be best if you took care of it."

Miyu's raised eyebrow becomes indignant. "Excuse me, I know next to nothing about this."

“Last time I caused an earthquake, however indirectly,” Ryoken huffs, running a hand through his hair. “You... you’ll do well. You only have to convince it to come with us, and I doubt there’ll be much resistance if it’s just you.”

Miyu swallows down nerves, because she doesn’t want them. “Alright, then. How long—?”

“I think ten to fifteen minutes should be enough, if it’s uncooperative.” Ryoken’s eyes seem to shine, reflecting the water, and for a moment Miyu doesn’t see her childhood friend—she sees a hardened criminal, a man on a mission, carefully layered over the soul of a broken kid. “Should be easy enough to find.”

It’s a hard to swallow pill, but Miyu’s done nothing if not that with her life; turn her feelings into something minuscule and foul-tasting, used the careful coverage around them to keep herself from truly savoring them. It’s extremely terrifying, how much she understands him and simultaneously can’t seem to get a grasp on him.

Without much more than a quick exchange of a look, Miyu turns towards the edge and jumps.

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks for reading guys. drop down some comments with your thoughts, or maybe a cake, or a cookie, or just leave some kudos. i really enjoyed writing this chapter, and i had most of it done back in january but life happened, and then life happened again. and life is happening again, so, stay safe!!

9. dawn to dusk

Notes for the Chapter:

it seems i always end up updating this every three months lol

say nice things to celepom in order to thank her for the fact that this doesn't have thousands of typos or i'll hunt u down you're warned

ENJOY :)

The water's much colder down here.

She can barely think from the shock of the temperature drop for a few seconds, instincts that aren't fully hers kick in to keep her afloat, to bring her up to the surface. She thinks she sees, for an instant, Ryoken's face peeking over the edge she just jumped from, but she's closing her eyes and letting herself sink again as she regains control, giving in to the soothing call of *something* at the bottom.

Something familiar, that used to scare her. Something her mother drowned out with medication after medication until Miyu forgot what it was like to be sober for years and then almost burned out of herself through withdrawal. Something that only recently she was able to fully hear again, in soft-spoken tones that reassured her at night, when Aoi didn't make it home.

She's barely able to see where she's going, but it's not so cold anymore.

It turns out, as Miyu starts moving, deeper and deeper and towards the place her instincts call her to, that Ryoken was right. It's easy to find the cocoon, because it's pulsing and lighting up the otherwise complete darkness of the water that seems to swallow her the deeper she goes. She isn't exactly sure the pulsing is in her head or in the water, but she knows it's there, and that seems like enough to guide her. It's evident that Ryoken just sort of threw whatever it is that he's looking for here with the intention of it being

impossible to retrieve, and Miyu's hands graze over rocks that don't share a texture with the rest of this cave, almost as if they recently fell in.

It's so peaceful, down here, and the longer she swims the more this feeling of rightness settles over her. Is this how Yusaku felt, she wonders, when he found this? How Spectre felt? It feels too unique, for it to be the case, and those two are so dramatically *themselves* that she doesn't think it could be like this, that for them it was rocky, or painful, because it's so intimate she can see how it would be unbalancing, for people who are so regularly in control, to feel like this, the deepest of their instincts rebelling against this even if only for a second.

Or maybe it wasn't like that at all, and they're all meant to feel a little bit like this—like this is where their instincts were taking them towards each time they followed them. Maybe her own should be washed away, or she should be the one panicking, because a lot of herself doesn't want to be here, and she's been fighting a part of herself for so long, instead of leaning into it like Spectre, Yusaku, Takeru and even Ryoken does, as broken as he is. Instead of that, they seem to be giving in to the peacefulness, like a siren's call, strengthening and pulling her together in such a way that she's extremely aware of everything around her and yet at the same time isn't.

She can tell the water's colder but her body heat remains, can tell how many things are *alive* down here because they brush against or swim around her as she goes down, clearly hears the way they move. It's—it's wonderful to feel this much, but she knows terror might slowly dawn upon her as soon as she's out of here, that she might get angry, that she might run away from this without looking back out of desperation, out of fear.

Or maybe she won't. She can't tell.

Miyu comes within reach of the cocoon, lays a hand upon it, and if she could sigh underwater she would, at the sheer, undiluted relief that washes over her. As it is, all she can do is chant inside her head, a chorus of 'it's you, it's you, it's you'.

A shiver runs down her spine.

The feeling is reciprocated, and too much at once, but she sees *her* – and it's *her*, she can feel it, doesn't need to ask – come to shape right in front of her eyes, familiar and light on her palm, more floating than swimming. Miyu suddenly feels like she might be a little bit in love; not in the way she's in love with Aoi, no, and not in the way she loves Ryoken and Spectre or even her mother, but a part of her feels like it's woken up from a long, long slumber.

She thinks she might cry, or that she is, but it's hard to tell underwater. She's been disconnected for *so long*, the same way Ryoken is, and he might not find relief for that—but maybe she can share this with him, too, if only in pieces.

"Miyu-chan," she says, her voice as clear as a bell in a way that should not be possible underwater, and something unravels painfully inside her, like a knot around her very soul has suddenly been cut off. How is she supposed to move on like this, afterwards, after years of putting up steel walls and having them torn down within a few seconds?

But it's so, so soothing.

"Miyu-chan, I'm here. It's alright."

She wants to apologize, suddenly, for not wanting this, the weight of guilt making it harder to not-breathe; to keep drawing oxygen from the water instead of trying to inhale air that isn't here, but she floats off her palm, a delicate, humanoid hand brushing against her cheek. "It's alright, Miyu-chan. You're right on time."

And she would hug her, if she were just a little bit bigger, but she's afraid of her strength getting the best of her right now, so she just nods, brushes one finger against that small, careful palm, and then swims back the way she came from.

"It felt like I was drugged," Miyu mumbles, hours later, eating a take-out salad Ryoken ordered for her. She's sitting on his bed, her hair dripping from her shower still, wearing a hoodie from his closet and shorts she

brought with her to this, this... *mission*. This *soul-searching* mission. Ryoken's sitting at his desk, watching her, eating the same as she is, not because he wants to but because she made him. After that swim, she can't stand the sight of meat, or worse, *sea food*. She's hopeful it will wear off, but he doesn't seem to mind it. "Like, you know when you have too many painkillers and it all just gets really blurry but also super clear? Kind of like that. It's... different from how Spectre told me it was for him."

Ryoken stabs a piece of tomato with his fork and narrows his eyes at it like it holds the answers to his questions—which Miyu is already giving him, anyways, so it mostly makes him look like a theater kid about to improvise a monologue. Miyu wouldn't put it past him, considering how the day went.

"How was it for him?" Ryoken asks, like he doesn't already know. Miyu stares at the tomato dripping sadly, waiting to be eaten.

"He said it was like there was a calling, which I felt, but also like something was... '*crumbling*'.." Ryoken finally puts the tomato inside his mouth, while Miyu rolls her eyes at her own words. "It might just be that he felt like that because he was in a literal crumbling cave, though."

"Well, his third eye seemed to have opened up for a while there afterwards, like hours and hours later. It was weird," Ryoken pauses and takes an appropriately sized bite of his salad, looking entirely too pretty while he's at it, like he didn't spent most of his morning climbing a cliff-side. Oh, how he is cursed. Ryoken taps his temple very gently, looking at her pointedly. "It also felt different for me, in my head. But only a little."

"Yeah, well, that's another way of saying he felt drugged. It's the same," she says, and looks down at her salad before reaching for the floor and grabbing the ranch sauce bottle she snatched from the fridge, pouring a way-too-generous amount onto her food. She feels like doing self-care right now. "Like, literally the same."

"Well, I can't really explain it either," Ryoken points his fork at her. "All I know is that it sounded different. Spectre was less... emotional, during his spaced-out state. The opposite of you, really."

“You’re awful at making me feel better,” Miyu shoves a big forkful of food into her mouth and Ryoken’s nose wrinkles in disgust. She flips him off in response, then reaches down to the floor again and takes a big gulp of soda. Pointing her fork at him the way he did, Miyu makes a sound of curiosity. “What did you feel though?”

Ryoken does not look amused with the question, but he doesn’t avoid it, which is... not progress, but a positive development. “Mostly, the exact same. A headache, static in my head. Annoyance, though less so than with Spectre. It might have just been because I was further away.”

That gives Miyu pause, and disappointment sits on her chest. “It was so soothing, though. Are you sure—?”

“Yes,” Ryoken snaps, which is quite rude, and the thought must show on her face because he sighs, running a hand through his hair, expression softening. “Sorry, it’s just... I’m not *like you*, and that connection... It goes both ways as well, but it’s not natural to me. It’s botched. The only one I can kind of hear well enough is the Ignis in Playmaker’s possession—which, speaking of, he might not have even realized he was drugged up with his wounds. He could have very well thought it was a concussion, from the sound of it.”

Miyu doesn’t really have an answer to that, nor to Ryoken’s admittedly good attempt at changing the subject, so she reaches for the Doritos she made Ryoken buy and opens the bag, dropping a bunch on top of her salad before passing it to him. He does the same, but his expression indicates he’s not exactly happy about it. He should be more open about his bad eating habits.

“It’s alright,” she says, softly, and the words feel heavy on her tongue, seem to be even more so on Ryoken’s shoulders. “When can I visit Aqua?”

Ryoken visibly perks up at this, raising an eyebrow. He wasn’t surprised at her giving the Ignis a name or a gender, earlier, but there was something about the acceptance of them that made him look like he was resigned to humanizing them instead of separating his feelings from them. “I thought you wanted nothing to do with this.”

Miyu falls silent, shrugging as a response, and dips a chip deeper into the ranch before covering it in salad and bringing it to her mouth. “I still don’t. But I want to see her.”

Ryoken’s quiet for too long after that, before finally giving in. “You can come whenever you want, then.”

Miyu shoots Ryoken a rather uneasy smile, and keeps on eating. They don’t say anything for a while, but a lot floats in the air between them. Half of it, Miyu doesn’t want to address. The other half, Ryoken doesn’t. It’s their usual impasse, their quiet truce not to hit too hard or too deep without agreement. Familiar and comforting, but leaving Miyu with a feeling of emptiness the more the silence goes on.

She clears her throat rather obnoxiously, trying to clear out the ice in the air. “What are you going to do now?”

Perhaps also affected by the day and the weight of the silence, Ryoken answers easily and honestly enough. “I need to find Dr. Taki. I don’t believe she’s dead, since by now her body would have been found. I have a vague idea of where she might be.”

“Are you going alone?” Uneasiness settles in her stomach, but Ryoken doesn’t seem bothered. If anything, he’s painfully casual, nodding while eating. Miyu’s unfortunately met Dr. Taki before, of course, because having been Ryoken’s friend in high school made it so, but she still can’t shake off the implications of her involvement... both with her, and with Ryoken. It gives her goosebumps. “Are you sure?”

“Spectre will be busy watching other locations. Kyoko mentioned that there were other teams at other locations trying to find the Ignis, and we can’t have anything happen if they come close. I don’t think she’ll be dangerous,” Ryoken shrugs, and Miyu notices he’s finished his salad. She doesn’t like that, or what he’s saying, but it’s purely out of the childish feeling of not wanting to leave his company. This stuff... she can’t share it with Aoi. But staying the night might be a little much for her right now, as well, and it might make Aoi more jealous than she already is of Ryoken. “I’ll be fine.”

“Why don’t you ask Playmaker to go with you?” Miyu suggests, hopeful, a question when it should be a fact that he will. It’s safest this way with Ryoken, when it comes to that subject. “He could help.”

Ryoken only narrows his eyes at her thinly-veiled attempt. “He’s mad at me. And has too much baggage regarding her.”

“Wonder why,” Miyu snorts, and takes the last few sad bites of salad remaining. “Make it up to him before one of you does something stupid, Ryoken. Like getting shot. *Again.*”

That particular memory of yesterday makes Ryoken wince. He’s been resting his ankle on ice ever since they got here. “I’ll think about it.”

Yusaku, predictably, isn’t getting groceries—or well, he was, but he forgot his wallet so he had to leave the store empty-handed right after walking in. It means he goes breakfast-less, but there’s so much building up inside him that his appetite is truly dead.

Ai is a light presence in his hoodie pocket, taking the shape of a really tiny salamander in order to make himself less strange-looking and be able to gaze around the city without someone screaming at the sight of him. Yusaku neglected public transit, because he felt like walking to think through the sluggish mud of his brain, but now that he’s outside and alone with Ai, he can feel curiosity burning through his being, entirely directed at his companion..

He isn’t sure if it’s only his imagination, but he has a feeling Ai can feel his energy directed at him through their strange bond and is choosing to ignore it. In order to play nice, Yusaku takes him to a few fun places for kids around the city, almost like he’s doing a tour of the area. Ai seems delighted when they pass by the Ferris wheel, and even more so when Yusaku shows him how gachapon vending machines work, though he seems fonder of the ones with snacks.

Yusaku’s making his way towards a video game shop, confident that Jin already did most of the work on educating Ai, when he speaks up. “Yusaku-

chan?”

“Yeah?” Yusaku answers, feigning interest in window shopping. He catches sight of Blue Angel merch and rolls his eyes.

“You’re being strangely nice today...” Ai starts, drifting off cautiously. Yusaku glances down to see his salamander head poking out of his hoodie pocket upwards, as if he’s trying to look at him but can’t because of his chosen anatomy. In order to resolve this, Ai’s eyes move, shifting in order to be on top of his head in ways that they definitely shouldn’t be if he wants to keep up appearances. It’s disturbing to watch. “You’re being oddly quiet, too. You aren’t trying to butter me up, are you?”

Yusaku pauses, looks at him with narrowed eyes. “Are you sure you know nothing of Hanoi?”

Ai lets out a groan, genuine disappointment coloring his voice. “Ah, I knew it! What’s with that scary face, Yusaku-chan? I already told you all I know! I wasn’t awake when they formed!”

Yusaku thinks this through, but he has thoughts that have been bothering him ever since he got home last night. They barely let him sleep, keeping him awake even more than Kusanagi-san’s snoring. It was like seeing Kyoko and Faust after so long got him reminiscing, and then connecting odd dots that he never thought could be related, like the last twenty-four hours have managed to shift his world view on its axis. Something doesn’t feel right, and he has every intention to get to the bottom of it, even if it hurts.

“Hanoi appeared in public less than ten years ago. They were barely a rumor before the bioterrorism started.” Trying to be as subtle as possible, Yusaku walks into a quieter area, lowering his voice and ignoring how he can sense Ai’s unease somewhere in the back of his mind. “Kogami Kiyoshi’s experiments on us ceased more than a decade ago, against his will, which means you were already connected enough with us to start developing, unless he continued working on your lot alone. Kogami died, and Hanoi went even deeper underground while still operating before shifting their focus and leadership *again*—which just so happened to

coincide with Revolver's appearance, give or take a few months. Maybe a year. You never told me how many years you were in your cocoon, or how you got to the sewers."

Ai is actively shivering now; Yusaku can feel it through the hoodie. Fear ripples in his mind. "Yusaku-chan..."

Yusaku clenches his teeth and glares down at Ai, feeling white-hot rage flare from his chest. Judging by the sound Ai makes, the feeling reaches his eyes.

"What do you know about Revolver?"

Finding Kyoko is easier than Ryoken would have expected it to be, initially. While his hunch was good, it could have easily left him empty handed, but he's glad that it didn't. It means he'll get to make the most of his day.

Miyu leaves barely an hour or so after having lunch in his bedroom, trying to pretend she doesn't want to stay and sleepover and have contact with their newly acquired Ignis. It worries him, frankly, how every time one of the victims of the experiments comes in contact with them, their attitude seems to... shift, if only slightly and temporarily. There was barely change in Fujiki Yusaku beyond their seemingly newfound teamwork, and Spectre seemed to have mellowed out, if being generally more quiet and a bit less snarky could be considered that. It could easily be that he's still feeling the odd high of it because of prolonged contact.

The encounter seemed to have rattled something in Miyu's mind, and he knows he'll have to make it up to her for the emotional stress it seemed to have put her under, but right now he has other priorities.

Namely, breaking into Kyoko's old place on the outskirts of town, right on the edge of the suburbs. He's wearing the Revolver suit, or at least most of it—the military style cargo pants, the elbow-length turtleneck, the mask. The cloaking device for his hair is not activated this time, because he doesn't think he'll need it, and he decided to drop the trench coat now that he's going to be spending more time running in quiet, dark spaces than he

was before yesterday. Breaking into every Hanoi base—it's not going to be easy, and he needs current intel beyond his own observations of their patterns and previous knowledge, something more tangible.

The gate is predictably open, the digital lock obviously broken into. Decay is evident even from the outside of the property, the gate's walls stained with layers of dust and spider webs, the paint threatening to peel off in some areas, moisture floating in the air and invading his nostrils. The stone path leading up to the porch steps has seen better days of less overgrown grass on top, growing from between cracks, and the garden itself shows no trace of the previously meticulous work that was done on the flowers, which were left to overgrow, vines and bad weeds clinging to the inner walls of the gate.

It's a rather western design for a home, the kind that only extremely rich people can afford to keep and to let deteriorate like this, with stone pillars holding up the porch roof, carved, thick white wood fences connecting each one of them, wooden floors, bigger-than necessary windows. The front door seems to have a working security system, locked, which is sloppy if you want to pretend to have left this place six years ago unprotected.

It's strange to walk up the porch steps and knock. It brings back less than pleasant memories, and some that aren't that bad, but he tries not to dwell on it too much. This is where he lived, after he decided New Domino and being normal wasn't for him, during the years Hanoi pretty much *belonged* to him. Where he finished high school in between working to organize a bioterrorist group. Knocking, in this moment, is a show to demonstrate to Kyoko that he's walking neutral ground, but it also feels odd to do so in a place that he used to call a sanctuary—when it wasn't used as a meeting base, of course.

There's no response from inside the house for several minutes, so Ryoken decides to press his thumb against the fingerprint scanner right next to the doorbell, knowing it's a risk. It doesn't recognize him at first, so Ryoken rubs the grime off it, and tries again.

The way the door opens silently but for the sound of the lock sends a shiver down his spine. He's barely stepped a foot into the house before the sound

of bullets going into a gun reach his ears, and he looks up the receiving room to the top of the staircase to his left, at the inner balcony that leads into the hallways where the bedrooms are.

Kyoko looks worse for wear, which isn't surprising. Her clothes are ripped in places, as obvious signs of struggle, her hair is tussled, there are patches of dry blood over her hands and face and her skin is pale, either from stress or a wound hidden underneath her clothes. She's holding a hunting rifle, which isn't exactly her style but certainly gives Ryoken memories.

Cocking the gun, she turns the safety off. A clear warning. She's not pretending this time.

"You know why I'm here," Ryoken says, staring at the barrel of the gun from below for a few seconds. Kyoko's hands are shaking, and her expression is grim, distinguishable because of the sunlight streaming through the windows. Most of the curtains are closed, but light still finds a way in. "I want to talk."

"I'm not as useful as you think. Faust was right," her voice trembles, and Ryoken's nose picks up the scent of fear, adrenaline, blood, the way her heartbeat violently punches her ribcage. "You don't need anything from me, Ryoken. Don't be delusional."

"You could at least confirm my information," Ryoken pauses, and with a sigh, brings his hands up in a sign of surrender, but doesn't take off the mask. "I know what you did for me. For Spectre. That you don't have much time. But, please... help me make it count."

Ryoken's never seen Kyoko break down before, and he finds that it isn't quite as distressing as he would have otherwise imagined. It's not a big moment, just the rise and fall of her shoulders, the clenching of her jaw, and the lowering of the gun. She runs a hand over her face, a clear sign of giving up, and takes her time before looking back at Ryoken, gesturing him up with a defeated expression. He tries not to stare at the way she's holding the gun tightly, and knows exactly what she'll use it for later.

It's better than any other alternative.

She leads Ryoken into what used to be a study, but now is empty but for Faust's limp body in the middle of the room, on a chair. It isn't a particularly shocking sight, since he figured that Kyoko would not let herself be maimed by her own weapon, but it's clear that she spent some quality time with him. He's still tied up, and Ryoken can see him missing a few nails underneath the bloody mess of his hands, can see the spots where Kyoko slowly cut as deep as his bones with surgical precision, and the teeth carelessly dropped to the floor from what must have been a very thorough extraction. Kyoko was never the best dentist.

The body isn't even that cold yet. He missed a rather interesting morning, but he wouldn't pick this over an Ignis, another move in the board against Hanoi—and Playmaker, considering how things were shaping up.

"And you said you don't have information?" Ryoken crosses his arms, turning his head to look at her. Kyoko just sighs and leads him further into the room, outside to the balcony looking over the backyard. This garden is in an even worse state than the front, but at least it frees him from the smell of humidity and dust, and gives him an edge to lean against, the gesture familiar because he's done it a thousand times before, in the same spot, the railing digging against his lower back with less resistance than before. "The day you've had seems to say otherwise."

Kyoko moved the small tea table and chairs that used to be on the front porch up here. A bottle of whiskey next to a pack of cigarettes and two wine glasses are the only things on top of it. She sits down and pours them both a drink, which Ryoken should refuse since his day won't end after this conversation, but the way she looks at him lets him know he has no choice. There's blood on the glass she hands him, but Ryoken hardly looks at it before raising his glass in a mock toast.

"I thought it would be worth it," Kyoko shrugs, gesturing vaguely towards Aso's body. Her tone is almost flat, but she doesn't really smell of alcohol or tobacco yet, so she's sober. The lack of inflection is just proof of her own disillusionment, and that she was expecting him. "But he was put under the control of that mask. The newest prototype, as you may already know, that is only used to send orders into the brain, and doesn't require more than a few doses of a hive-mind drug to mold the mind without a surgical

procedure. Previous commands overlapped to make it seem like he wasn't under its control, which also meant he wouldn't tell me anything. An absolute waste."

"Well, I guess that explains your willingness to torture and kill him," Ryoken takes a sip of his drink, holds the liquid in his mouth for a few seconds, considering, before swallowing. It's an expensive brand, bitter and sharp enough that it makes him want to water it down with ice. A drink meant for a farewell. "I thought that was odd, yesterday. How you just attacked. I admit I didn't even notice he was different. I had other things to worry about."

"He wasn't that different, anyways," Kyoko nods, and Ryoken hums in acknowledgement. "The only weakness of the new method of mind control Hanoi is developing—"

"—is the limitations regarding long term memory access. I know. The ones needed for him to work well were the only ones modified and kept."

Kyoko drinks from her glass through mouthfuls, but she takes her time with them before swallowing, as if enjoying each one. She doesn't talk again until she finishes her first glass and pours her next, but tears open the cigarette pack, lighting one up, before even touching the drink again. It's a strangely pleasant pause, and Ryoken doesn't hesitate when she hands him a cigarette as well, despite not really being into smoking. Slowly, it feels like this is turning into a good-bye party. He can't say that he hates it, if Kyoko's made her peace with it, and even removes the mask before taking a drag of his smoke. Might as well make this count.

"He could only remember the things related to Hanoi. Me leaving, us working with your father, you, the Ignis. Nothing beyond that. I noticed it as soon as I was back," Kyoko takes a long drag of her cigarette and allows the smoke to escape through her nose, enjoying it to its fullest. There's none of the grace Ryoken used to associate with her, that elegant capsule that she was, that wouldn't dare to drink alcohol in his presence, not by herself. Six years can change a lot, Ryoken guesses. "I should have killed him right away, Ryoken. It's my fault he ended up like that."

Her voice shakes as she says it, choked off as if holding back tears, but he doesn't move to comfort her. She doesn't want that, not really, and she doesn't want it from one of several children she helped break apart, piece by piece. Nostalgia has always been a dangerous thing for him, but he wishes that every time he looked at her he could only see the good and not feel the echoes of phantom pain across the scars of his back, if only so he could bid her farewell without resentment.

But life doesn't work that way, does it? After all, it's his fault she's like this, and it's his fault there's even a hunt for the Ignis, instead of them being long gone.

"What do you want?" She asks, when he doesn't offer up any words. She's looking right at him, at the mask he left over the table, pain behind her eyes, not even blinking when he takes a drag of his cigarette and blows the smoke too close to her face. They're starting to fill with tears, something else that Ryoken hasn't quite seen before. He only ever remembers her crying out of anger, her face red with fury, and that one time that she was just letting the tears run without apparent reason, when she pushed Ryoken to escape after taking the gun from him but letting him keep the incubation test tubes. "What could I possibly give you, knowing it's not enough to atone?"

Ryoken should probably talk to her, about her regrets. Gather words to offer to the victims that are left when he's done with this mission, but he knows they would ring empty—both to him and to anyone else that heard them. No one truly wants to hear that the people involved regretted it. They only want recorded confessions, and then watching them clutching at prison bars.

It's a shame it won't happen, but another form of punishment has always been his goal.

"Locations," Ryoken finally says, after a few seconds of taking small drags of his cigarette and a large sip of his whiskey. He doesn't intent to have seconds of either. "Where you sent them hunting for the Ignis, considering you mentioned other teams on location. Operation plans. Any traps. New weapons, new equipment. Anything that I might not be sure of or know at all."

Kyoko's smile is grim. "Then I'm afraid I don't have much at all, Ryoken."

A pause, which Ryoken ends with a sigh. "Indulge me."

"Ah! Yusaku-chan, really, this is quite extreme! And unnecessary!"

Ai babbles on, but Yusaku doesn't really listen to any of his complaints as he steps with a loud, wet sound, in another sewer water puddle. It's been hours since he's left home now and his phone wouldn't stop vibrating so he turned it off entirely. It wasn't exactly his plan to come here, but he didn't really trust any conversations with Ai around the deeply technologically inclined city with security cameras on every corner, and he realized after his initial inquiry that he was close to the area where he found Ai, so he might as well check it out to make the most of this.

"If you didn't try to lie to me, Ai," he starts, interrupting whatever tirade he's going on. He's gotten worryingly good at drowning his voice out in just a day. "We could have probably left already."

"I wasn't lying!"

"Lying by omission is still lying," Yusaku takes a left turn, mentally tracing a map of the city's sewer system and doing his best to find the corner he had the displeasure of meeting Ai at. "I thought you were familiar enough with human culture through the link between us as a learning device, not as assimilation."

"Well, I do have to blend in, don't ya' think!?"

Yusaku shoots Ai a glare that he can *feel* giving him wrinkles for the future, and he lets out a meek '*eep!*' in response, his expression somehow appearing to be terrified despite the lack of eyebrows and... features, really. He's shifted back to his humanoid shape, which makes Yusaku vaguely wonder if his '*family*' looks the same, and if it's even possible to differentiate them from one another. He sure hopes not all of them are like Ai. Yusaku doesn't like liars.

He isn't entirely sure what he's looking for down here other than a place to carry on his interrogation; Yusaku knows about every inconspicuous spot in the city for any criminal activity, and the only spot in the sewer system is an old Hanoi base that was already abandoned when he found it a couple years back. He was with Revolver at the time, and he didn't seem particularly surprised by it, which at the very least gave him an idea of who took care of it beforehand. Revolver hadn't given him a chance to look around before grabbing him by the waist and kissing him.

Yusaku's so angry he might be sick.

"I asked you a simple question," Yusaku rolls his eyes, and stops in his tracks, pondering his choices and turning around after deciding to walk towards the Hanoi base instead of the previous placement of Ai's cocoon. Ai might remember something if he sees it, or maybe be willing to give him ideas. He doesn't recall anything particularly mysterious about Ai's corner, anyways. "I only want to know about Revolver's relation to Hanoi."

Ai huffs, so loudly that it actually echoes across the tunnels. "And why would I know anything about that?"

"Because you're awful at being subtle on top of pretending you're not lying by omission," Yusaku mumbles, to which comes an indignant '*'excuse me!?*' that doesn't temper his anger. "You didn't seriously think I'd be blind to all of this forever, right?"

"I have no idea what you're implying!" Ai insists, so Yusaku halts his steps to glare at him. Ai tries to be defiant, but when Yusaku makes no move to stop, he starts to fidget nervously. "Yusaku-chan, I don't know what you want me to say. Even if I knew something, what would you do with information about the guy that just told you to sit tight and wait it out? It doesn't change anything, from how I see it!"

Punch his teeth out, first off, Yusaku thinks but doesn't say, clenching his jaw, ignoring how, from where *he* sees it, it changes everything. Having the upper hand on Revolver, who he's now absolutely certain has been a Hanoi spy all along, would be sweet to say the least, and the petty side of him wants to rub his face in it by beating him at his shitty games. His logical

brain knows that realistically, it would only get Revolver pissed, but he really can't bring himself to care right now. He feels up for a fight, even after yesterday being the absolute worst.

Which, bizarrely, reminds Yusaku of Kogami Ryoken. After last night, there's almost no doubt that he can't be in any way related to Revolver, much less so *be* him, unless there's some bodyguard business Ryoken's not even aware of coming from Revolver, for whatever evil reason. They're just so... jarringly, almost painfully different. He can't imagine someone like Revolver allowing himself to be bossed around by a lady with a gun, much less so *cower* under one.

There's also the shot he took. Yusaku's never seen Revolver getting hurt like that ever—it's virtually impossible, at least considering what he knows about his mutation, what he's witnessed while working with him. There's absolutely no chance they're the same, and strangely enough, it almost makes Yusaku feel disappointed and a little frustrated to have concrete proof; it complicates his relationship with both Ryoken and Revolver, and his half-crazed thought about accepting Ryoken's date creeps on him, as well as Revolver's threat to end their quiet truce.

He knows, logically, that whatever he has with Revolver has gone too far. He's gotten himself in too deep, and he's refused to swim back up to the surface because of how ridiculously exhilarating it is to be with him without the complications of day-to-day life. But it isn't destined to be. He knows that now. He can't let it go on. Next time he sees him, Yusaku is going to be ready to give his all. He's done with games.

"Eh, Yusaku-chan? You've spaced out." Ai's voice snaps him out his thoughts, and he realizes he's been staring off into an undetermined point in the sewers without answering. Ai actively waves a hand in front of his eyes as if to check he's still alive, stretching his arm further than he should be able to, down from his hoodie pocket. "Wow, talking about him really does knock a few screws out of you, doesn't it?"

Yusaku, yet again, glares at him. "If you're not going to give me the information I need you might as well keep quiet."

Ai mumbles an ‘ouch, rude!’, and Yusaku keeps moving. He finds the fake wall that leads to the Hanoi base about ten minutes later, and sneaks in as quietly as possible, sort of familiar with the layout but not confident that, with the new developments of yesterday, Hanoi hasn’t tried to reclaim a few of their dormant bases already. They can be fast when they want to be.

Playmaker reported this one to the city, so it was cleaned up, but there’s always loose ends when it comes to the work done by city hall. They aren’t very good at locating hidden deposits within places, which has actually proven to be an issue before. Yusaku isn’t fond at all of all the times that they’ve managed to miss spots only for it to bite *him* in the ass instead. He should be getting a salary, but he has no desire to be doxed.

The place is as dreadful as he remembers, though, perhaps even more so. It’s a rather open area, made up of several sewer tunnels, the high ceiling connecting to the street makes it so some sunlight filters through, lighting up an otherwise boxed space. A platform was built over the running water of the sewers, presumably by Hanoi and not cutting it off by a hair, but there was no avoiding the sounds of waste going through the room or the smell. A few tents were still up, fewer than Yusaku remembers, which says a lot about how lazy city-hall clean up can get, and he goes through them in silence, ignoring how Ai’s gone completely quiet.

He thinks it’s out of fear, hopes it’s because the room might be making him either more willing to talk or remember something, and opens his mouth to ask if that’s the case— only to get interrupted by a sound coming from the far off connected tunnels to his left. Yusaku freezes, words dying in his mouth, as he listens.

Needless to say, there shouldn’t be anyone here. He almost wants to write it off as sewers doing their work, but the sound comes again, and Yusaku recognizes it as steps now, followed by a metallic drag of *something*. He looks down at Ai to see him staring in the same direction the noise is coming from, equally frozen, but Yusaku can’t tell if it’s because of fear, caution, or if he’s just listening in and trying to make sense of this.

Yusaku has to admit that Playmaker didn’t actually do a search of the place himself before reporting it. While these tunnels were in the blueprints of the

city, it was easy for Hanoi to take over quietly—no one is doing routine tours of the sewers often enough to notice changes, after all, and it didn't seem like whatever work they were doing was particularly dangerous nor that it lasted for long, so it wasn't loud, and their territory didn't expand into other areas. The fake walls worked well enough for them. The summary turned into the city hall that he hacked out of their database only described it as a weapons factory, particularly of firearms, which is the least insulting thing Hanoi's done in their careers.

But maybe, *probably*, they missed something bigger. Some experiment that's been left to go wild in the sewers like something out of a terrible horror movie, perhaps a self-intelligent weapon—or maybe Yusaku's overthinking what's most likely Hanoi members sent for recon in order to occupy more areas of the cities, now that the race for the Ignis is a thing.

There's six of them, after all. Yusaku's only heard of Ai and he has no idea if Hanoi got the Ignis that was apparently located in the mountain last night. Dr. Taki said they had teams on locations, which means they have a vague idea of where each Ignis is. It's possible that Hanoi might as well be looking for Ai right now, perhaps not knowing how each of them look being a reason for them to go after one that's taken.

Regardless of what it is, though, it's bad news for him. He didn't bring his suit with him, and he doesn't plan on showing his hand to Hanoi any more than he already did last night. He should retreat, go back home, fill Takeru and Kusanagi-san in his newly made connections and the probability that Hanoi is lurking closer than they'd like... but Yusaku's always liked a challenge, and he does have pent up anger to get rid of.

He pulls his hood on, grabbing the strings resting over his clavicles and pulling in order to tighten it up. Ai pulls at the fabric of his hoodie in response, and when Yusaku looks down he's making wild hand gestures that probably means he knows what he's thinking and he regards that as a bad idea, and they should leave.

Well, Yusaku's not taking second opinions today.

He moves as quietly as possible in the direction of the noise, keeping his footsteps light. It's hard; the platform is made out of metal and covered in water puddles, which are natural enemies of stealth if he doesn't watch it, but he's done much more dangerous sneaking around before without issue. He could definitely abuse his abilities right now, just go into the shadows of the walls and listen from there, move closer without being noticed much easier, but he's still quite exhausted and he didn't sleep as much as he should have to heal. The pain's mostly gone now, but he knows that if he pushes too hard right now he might get sloppy.

Yusaku follows the noise through the tunnel to his left first, then turns right and walks straight for about five minutes. He eventually spies, from a corner, a tunnel that opens up to a room from which sewer water is distributed, much bigger than the limited area of space in the sewers. There's not a drop of sunlight, and the only light coming from the room seems to originate from a portable energy plant—a very small one, that's barely making any noise lighting up a few lamps. He hadn't even noticed it until now, when he's practically right around the corner of it.

The steps are clear now. There's a platform in that room as well, also metal, which means this is probably the room in which most of Hanoi's work was made. A water drop keeps hitting it every few seconds, echoing across the tunnels and making Yusaku feel annoyance rising up his chest. The metallic sound from earlier never came again, but now there's another type of shuffling, plastic snapping, the sounds of boxes meeting tables.

Yusaku's about to reconsider going in alone, or at all, lingering in this corner, when a voice suddenly comes, echoing across the quiet.

"You aren't just going to stand around all day, are you?"

Oh, Yusaku thinks, jaw clenching, anger flashing through his body once more, oh, it's this fucker.

Heartbeat going crazy and hopefully creating the illusion of being a terrified, innocent boy, hand shoved into his hoodie's pockets to keep Ai out of sight, Yusaku steps around the corner, allowing him full sight of the room, Revolver's back coming into view.

Revolver, who turns around from where he hunches over a table with a gun and boxes upon boxes of ammo, fully takes in sight of Yusaku, and tilts his head as if confused, a curious smile forming over his lips. His mask is on, of course, and he's ditched the trench coat for a classic black, elbow length turtleneck and cargo pants. He looks entirely too casual, but Yusaku doesn't miss the traces of blood that isn't his over his knuckles and the limp, Hanoi-uniform wearing bodies leaning against the table he's using, propped up against boxes of what Yusaku suspects to be more ammo.

"Interesting," Revolver says, taking exactly three steps closer to him. His smirk is almost predatory, his posture confident and menacing. When he crosses his arms, Yusaku stares at his uncovered forearms, his gloveless hands, the tightly coiled muscle under his skin, and thinks not for the first time about how easy it'd be for Revolver to kill him. About how he hasn't. "Seems like I've confused you with someone else."

This catches Yusaku's attention, and panic rises quicker than he can bring it down, a question escaping his mouth in a rush. "What?"

Revolver hums, stares, and turns back to his table like this was a casual visit to his home, not an apparently lurking civilian barging in on his less than legal activities and three dead bodies. "Thought you were an acquaintance, is all. You have footsteps lighter than a rat's. I'm guessing you're good at pickpocketing?"

An acquaintance? Is he talking about Playmaker? Yusaku wonders, biting his tongue hard. Revolver calmly goes back to his work, leaving him to stare at his back, and casually picks up a bullet from a little plastic box full of them organized in a row, examining it carefully before throwing it rather unceremoniously, throwing it into a much bigger box sitting on the table. That metallic sound from earlier echoes across the room, setting Yusaku's teeth on edge.

"What are you doing?" He asks, keeping his voice small. He doesn't think he sounds scared or shocked enough for an innocent kid, but his acting skills are rarely reliable. Usually, he gets himself out of situations before he has to bullshit his way through, but his recklessness today has led him into very unsavory results.

Revolver pauses mid-examination of another bullet, and turns his head in his direction, letting him see the profile of the mask.

“Do you have a death wish or are you just that dense, kid?”

Yusaku bristles. “I’m not a kid—”

Revolver slams his hands down on the table and Yusaku jumps at it, the sound echoing across the tunnels. This, he would be able to hear from further away than he was originally at. It’s a warning, a display of strength that hasn’t actually been used against him before. Something drops to the bottom of his stomach, but Yusaku doesn’t give a name to it.

“When someone dangerous doesn’t kill you on sight, people tend to scramble away. Not argue about their age.” Revolver turns around fully, leans back against the table with a sigh, as if Yusaku’s stupidity is exhausting for him, and after a few seconds of nothing, starts walking towards him. He doesn’t stop at three steps this time, and Yusaku starts to back off automatically, his body choosing flight. “It seems I was right about the death wish.”

He’s not usually intimidated by Revolver. It’s been about four years since Revolver last threatened him without it being a joke or a warning to stay put in regards to Hanoi, so this feels new—especially because Revolver’s never been so utterly sure he could kill him before. Playmaker had shown him skill from the second they met, resistance, knowledge on how to handle himself in a fight, but right now Yusaku looks like a scrawny, lost boy, his soft features and clothes concealing the strength under his skin.

Strength that would be no match for Revolver, if he meant it, if he didn’t pull punches, and if he wasn’t fast enough to fight back, damn his identity. The fear that sparks in him is very real, and long-forgotten; it’s been years since he’s actually been afraid of death, felt it breathing down his neck, but now that he’s so close to *something*. Something that would make all his years searching worth it, he finds that he really, really doesn’t want to meet his end like this.

Suddenly, he’s not so eager for a fight.

Yusaku's back meets a wall and he presses his eyes shut when Revolver's hands slam against it, right next to his ears. He never wanted to admit it before, but he's good at this intimidation thing. He has to get himself out of this, though, get away from him before he truly decides to kill him instead of scaring him into shitting his pants.

"I—I'm sorry," is what comes out of his mouth, and he'd be lying if he said he's faking the shakiness of it. He opens his eyes to meet Revolver's mask, feeling the humidity of the wall penetrate his back, and sucks in a quick breath, trying to calm himself down. He can't let this get to him; Revolver might be ruthless but he isn't heartless. He doesn't kill without reason. Yusaku hasn't given him a real one yet, so he has to keep his rationality. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking—"

"No shit. Are you a fan, or something?" Revolver leans even closer to his space, breath ghosting over Yusaku's face. He smells like whiskey and cigarettes, which is completely new to him. He's never known Revolver for drinking or smoking, and it makes him wonder what he went off to do after yesterday morning. Where he's been; if he smells like this because he was relaxing somewhere or working on his own odd ways of getting to the Ignis first. "It isn't nice to meet your idols, is it? It can be disappointing."

"I just—" Yusaku hesitates, trying to come up with a lie. He settles on a half-truth. "I was just taking a walk around town and remembered some rumors about the sewers. I wanted to check it out."

Revolver's eyebrow raise is audible. "Right, and then you decided to follow noises."

Yusaku swallows. "It—I admit it wasn't my best move."

Revolver hums at him again, backs off a little so Yusaku isn't breathing his scent any longer—which is regretful; sewer water doesn't smell *nice*, exactly. Booze and leftover smoke is far easier to adapt to. "What were the rumors, then?"

Fuck, Yusaku thinks, with feeling, tempted to face palm or maybe straight up punch himself. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*.

Seems like half-truths are his only shitty alternative. He should trademark it. “People were saying something about a lab down here, or a factory, or—I, I don’t really remember. They were saying Hanoi was around here.”

Yusaku’s eyes flicker towards the bodies and Revolver chuckles, shaking his head.

“Well, they were. I cleaned them up.” Revolver smiles at him, vicious. It’s disconcerting, a jarring difference to how Revolver usually acts around him. He’s being an asshole, but he’s being an asshole because he knows – thinks – that Yusaku wouldn’t be able to raise a finger against him, instead of just trying to get a rise out of him as an excuse to make out. Thinks him a stupid kid about to get himself killed. “Turns out they hid some special ammo down here that could get people like me killed. I can’t let that slide, can I?”

A thousand alarm bells go off in his brain, but Yusaku ignores them. He needs to focus. “I... I see.”

Revolver stares some more, as if expecting something more from him. When he doesn’t speak up again, Revolver backs off completely, sighing, scratching the back of his head. Yusaku feels a little dizzy from the sudden return of personal space, from the disappearance of that huge threatening aura, despite the under-lit room making his silhouette stand out. Revolver’s voice brings him out of it.

“Any more questions, then?”

Yusaku’s eyes widen. “*What?*”

“You said you wanted to know what I was doing, and you didn’t say you weren’t a fan,” Revolver pauses, shooting him a smirk that’s closer to the one he’s used to getting: playful, oddly charming, blinding. “You have *really* bad taste, kid.”

Yusaku blinks at him, incredulous. Is Revolver like this to civilians when no one is looking? Instead of ignoring them like when he’s with Playmaker, he chooses to terrify them and then lets them go? He might be more insane than he already thought him to be. Or reckless. Or *both*.

He thinks about it. There's no guarantees that Revolver would answer any question honestly, and Yusaku's *so angry* with him, under the unexpected shock over this turn of events. He wants to punch his face in until his hands bleed, which would happen fast, but even then, he has no words to describe this feeling of betrayal boiling up inside him like a disease, spreading through his system.

He tells himself that he's probably going to be brushed off, or that Revolver is just going to laugh in his face. It'll be fine. He just needs to get this question out, in order for part of himself to relax, to quell some of the panic and direct his full anger towards one thing, instead of at multiple targets all over Revolver's body.

Yusaku looks right at the mask, unblinking. "Do you know who Playmaker truly is?"

Revolver's smile widens, giddy and mockingly, but instead of bursting out laughing, he leans in again, crowds Yusaku even further against the wall, leaving him nowhere to run to. Their bodies don't brush, but they don't need to; Yusaku feels the implication, the whisper of it, from all the other times it's been like this. Lips brush softly against Yusaku's earlobe, sending a shiver down his spine that he's not sure how to feel about, his heart pounding and his breath suddenly more ragged than it's been throughout their interaction, more out of control than when he was genuinely terrified for his life.

When he speaks, Revolver's voice has dropped to a husky whisper, a hint of playfulness to it, and he talks slowly, as if letting the weight of his words sink in. A hand ghosts over his shoulder, not really touching him, but Yusaku isn't paying attention to it.

His mind has zeroed in on his words, trying but failing to process them through his mind. As if the syllables of them would change and give him a different meaning, a different answer, if he tried hard enough. As if he could get what he wanted.

"Why, of course I do."

A kiss lands on his cheek, and then Revolver turns away. Gone as if he hadn't been there at all.

Yusaku stares at his retreating back, takes a deep, shaky breath in, and bolts.

10. understudy (part 1)

Notes for the Chapter:

what up it me!

two updates in less than three months??? you mean three, because i had to split this in two because it got LONG.

don't get used to it guys XD

say thank you to celepom for having eyes and enjoy this rich rich plot development. ish.

Takeru had a tough time adjusting for about the first thirty minutes of Flame being around, and then he just kind of shrugged off the weirdness. After his shrieking nearly left Jin and Kusanagi-san deaf, causing them to rush to the bathroom just to find him scrambling among goo under Flame's rather judgmental, beady eyes, he was just about able to pull himself together and talk to his apparent new companion.

It went a little bit like this:

“Homura Takeru,” Flame declares, again, wiggling in his hold, holding up a tiny pointer finger at him, as Kusanagi-san pushed Takeru out of the bathroom in order to get rid of the goo before it hardened or stained, since he’s always had good priorities. Jin chews bread from the sidelines. “I’ve successfully found you. I’ve given myself a human name, Flame, in order to fit in—”

“That doesn’t sound like a human name.” Jin says, still chewing, but Flame only speaks louder, wanting to be heard. Takeru could agree that Jin’s commentary wasn’t particularly relaxing.

“—from now on, you and I are to bond so we can guarantee coexistence and fully become kin. I’ll ensure your safety and you’ll ensure my own. We’re to be partners.”

“Hold on, that sounds like a contract,” Takeru blinks at him, halting his steps in the middle of the living room and watching him wriggle some more, so he loosens his grip, letting him get another arm out of his fist. He might have grabbed him too tight in his panic, but he couldn’t help it. He’s standing in only a towel, with goo all over. “Are we supposed to swear on this stuff? Yusaku didn’t mention that.”

Flame, with his deep yellow eyes not unlike Ai’s, stares at Takeru as if he thought him deeply dense. It’s not the first time someone’s done so, of course, but the look is somewhat effective on him, reminding Takeru of when Yusaku looks at him when he’s just about done with trying to help him study, or when a professor seems very disappointed.

Flame clearly isn’t as easy going as Ai, and Takeru is kind of relieved for that. He doesn’t know if he could handle that kind of energy on top of his own fluctuating vitality, like Yusaku does.

“I’m only stating a fact,” Flame answers, and curls his baby hands into fists. “I demand to be put down so we can have a civilized conversation.”

“Eh,” Takeru looks at Jin for some guidance, but he just shrugs, swallowing his last piece of bread before heading back to the kitchen to hunt down the rest of his breakfast. From the bathroom, Kusanagi-san curses at something, so Takeru decides to follow Jin. “Is the kitchen alright with you?”

The kitchen is indeed alright with Flame—maybe a little too much, since he requested to have a taste of their breakfast and almost choked on the tiny piece of bread and eggs Takeru gave him. He probably should have thought about feeding him better, since this bread was expensive, and he doesn’t know if the Ignis need bathroom breaks.

Regardless, Flame proceeded, not a drop of dignity lost to his speech after that incident, to explain the inner workings of the Ignis, which Takeru could only *guess* is the same thing Ai did with Yusaku. There hasn’t been much time to talk lately, which now that he thinks about it, isn’t good. They’ve been too distracted.

“We’ve been genetically modified to be able to live off the atmosphere, but organics are also effective and just as easily assimilated to our mass to turn into energy. Though, our preferred method of retaining and producing energy is sleeping, in groups if possible. We can also relay information to each other like that if we wish to,” Flame walks around the kitchen table, almost marching like a soldier, while Takeru tries to clean the goo off his hair with a hand towel Jin handed him. It’s kind of working, but he’ll still need another shower afterwards. “In human terms, you’re like my parent, but our dynamic can develop naturally without needing to meet expectations. This development is important; the closer we are, the stronger we will be. It’s mutually beneficial.”

Takeru is far more relaxed now, so he can stop to think about this for a few seconds as reality sinks in. But the longer he looks at Flame’s tiny frame, the cloudier he feels, as if someone is trying to press him into a very warm cotton fluff mattress. It’s nice, but it doesn’t quell his rapidly surfacing worries.

“Aw, Flame, you know, you’re too cute to be saying so many big words...” Takeru thinks out loud, leans on his elbow and stretches out his arm in order to poke the side of Flame’s face, where a human cheek would be. Flame swats at his hand as if it were a giant mosquito. “You’re so tiny, too... Can I really take care of you?”

Flame stares at him and crosses his arms. “You don’t need to worry. If your personality is any indication, you’ll probably need my guidance anyways.”

Takeru still doesn’t know if that was an insult.

Despite the rough start, Takeru finds something has clicked in his head. He isn’t exactly sure of what it is, but he feels lighter on his feet now, like his mind is clearer, his thoughts sharper. It’s a small change that he didn’t notice until he actually got to take that proper shower, like being wrapped up in a blanket with socks on during cold, heater-less winters, or like he’s resting his head over a very soft pillow.

He wonders if perhaps it’s supposed to feel like this, like he’s been forgetting something all his life and just remembered it, but he decides to

not overthink it. As the day progresses and he explains their current situation to Flame, it dawns on him how dangerous it is to have him and Ai around. He hasn't really gotten to talk to Yusaku much about it, but they really have no way of protecting them that isn't, well... their bodies. A proper brawl.

It has him thinking of Revolver again, how the guy seems a little too connected to Hanoi to be coincidence, how he fought Playmaker to get Ai but refused to actually harm him, how he didn't show up or even leave a message to indicate he knew about last night. How it means he's probably far more prepared than either of them to deal with this, and can genuinely offer the Ignis some sort of protection—that is, if he's not looking to destroy them, or something like that. According to Playmaker, he called them dangerous, to which Takeru agrees, but there's a difference between that and actually hating them, or believing the world is better off without them.

Takeru doesn't like it, but they're getting nowhere. It's only been a couple of days, sure, but Hanoi went so far as to start digging into a mountain barely hours into this mess, and who knows what Revolver is doing? All this thinking leads Takeru in circles, to the point that he gives up on doing any studying. He's holed himself in Yusaku's room for that purpose, but he has a shift at Café Nagi later, so it's not like he'll get much done today either way.

He can't exactly scour all of Den City for Yusaku to air out these worries, since he hasn't answered any phone calls since he left this morning. He's been gone for hours and he's about to skip lunch. If Takeru didn't know him better, he'd be worried something happened to him, but when it comes to Yusaku, sometimes silence is better than the alternatives.

“Takeru?”

He glances up from his lap, his eyes falling over Yusaku's desk which he's currently borrowing, landing on Flame, who's just hanging out, sitting on a corner right next to a cat plushie he recalls gifting Yusaku not that long ago. It makes him look really cute. If Takeru were a little kid, he'd think him a toy.

“You’ve stopped working and started to stare off into space,” Flame continues, crossing his arms and rubbing with one hand what Takeru assumes is his chin. “While I could just use our bond to know what’s on your mind, it seems more polite to ask what’s troubling you. It’ll help us have an honest relationship.”

“Eh, thanks, I think,” Takeru looks down at his schoolwork and sighs. He was trying to write an essay, but he can’t even recall the subject right now. He might as well try to talk it out, if at least to hear what Flame might think, since he’s new to the situation. He might bring in a fresh perspective. “It’s just, I was thinking... Maybe there’s someone who can take better care of all of you, since we haven’t really been doing much, and we’re just painting him as another antagonist—though, to be fair, he doesn’t make it any easier waiting on him to become a white knight.”

Flame hums, nodding along to his words, and stands up to walk over his messy notes, closer to Takeru, making himself the center of attention. It also makes him look less like desk decoration, but more like a paper weight. Takeru’s not even sorry about the Ignis footprints over the two lines he managed to write down. He should really just drop out and open his own dojo, or something like that.

“You’re talking about this Revolver, correct?” Flame asks, and Takeru nods, tilting his head as he goes over his thoughts again. A dojo does sound rather nice. “He sounds capable, yet stubborn. His hesitancy to relay information to you is quite strange, considering his personal connections with Fujiki-kun.”

Takeru cringes. “Don’t tell him I told you about his affair. He’ll be pissed.”

“I’ll do my best,” Flame nods again, his voice sounding like he’s swearing on something sacred, so Takeru pokes him with his index finger again, almost knocking him over. Flame swats at it, not unlike a cat in a repetition of this morning, and it makes a little smile turn up his lips. “Still, that Revolver might be more prepared for our awakening does not mean that he has good intentions. You have no real reason to overthink his involvement, since he hasn’t actually given you many reasons to trust him, and you’re being too hard on yourselves. It’s been two days.”

“That’s the thing, though,” Takeru pauses and shakes his head, disbelieving of what he’s about to say. “I hate defending him, since most of the time he’s an asshole, but... sometimes, you meet people, and they immediately give off a vibe, and you can tell what kind of person they are just from that vibe. And Revolver...”

Takeru bites his lip, frowning, as a certain feeling of *déjà vu* dawns on him, though he doesn’t exactly know why. Flame tilts his head, waiting for Takeru to continue his train of thought, so he does.

“Revolver, he just seems kind of... kind of like he already knows how he’s going to end. And that makes it almost immediately clear, to me at least, that he isn’t actually mean spirited. He just does things and acts that way because he feels like he needs to,” Takeru blinks, frowns harder. Something about that bothers him. “And that makes him more prepared for everything. Who knows what he’s actually planning? He didn’t even show up last night, which was weird. The way he is bothers me, because it’s kind of—familiar. How he seems sort of... *sad*, almost. Solemn. A dead man walking. He’s so weird.”

Flame, apparently already completely tuned in to the workings of Takeru’s mind, prompts him with a question.

“Who does he remind you of, then? I would imagine you don’t meet people like that very often.”

It’s a good question, and a name wants to escape from the tip of Takeru’s tongue, rests at the edges of his mind, but he can’t seem to grasp it. Who does Revolver remind him of, when he’s not putting up this smokescreen, this mean character? When he’s saving his life and scolding him for it, or staring unblinking from behind that mask at Playmaker as if he wants to say hundreds of rehearsed speeches to him, but can’t?

There’s not that many people he’s met that give off that aura, and admittedly most have been women or already donning a persona that isn’t Revolver. Who’s smart enough to fit in? Sharp enough to leave even Yusaku reeling from it? Who lingers like that, from the sidelines, sticking out yet

blending in, like something you could miss if you were not looking from how hard he tries?

A name comes to mind, and Takeru's immediate reaction is to recoil from shock, denial filling his senses. He leans back on Yusaku's desk chair and stares, dumbfounded, at Flame, who clearly has no idea what's going through his mind right now. There's no way, right? It seems unlikely, and he's laughed off the same conclusions coming from Yusaku several times along with Kusanagi-san, because it's just...

And yet, even as he wants to dismiss it entirely, thinking that it just isn't possible and they would be astonishingly stupid if it were true, memories of last night come rushing through his mind, helping him connect dots he didn't even know existed before. A well placed, noticed by no-one-else punch. Exasperated looks, snarky remarks, criticism of their actions, a bullet wound that should have shattered bone at the very least yet only caused a bruise. A familiar smirk when no one is watching. Finding out that the Hanoi dude that shot at them was found dead when he watched the news after his shower.

Kogami Ryoken inviting Yusaku *out on a date*.

"Holy shit," Takeru says, springing up from the chair, almost making it fall to the ground. Flame jumps, startled, messing up the page he's standing on even further, but Takeru just runs his hands through his hair and blinks at the wall, shaken to his very core. "Holy shit, Flame. We're so fucking dumb."

Flame looks at him from head to toe, visibly concerned, and nods. "I'm inclined to agree, yes."

Revolver spends around two more hours in the sewers before he feels ready to leave. Despite Kyoko's admittedly vague information, he's managed to confirm most of his suspicions, and he already told Spectre to keep an eye on certain points of interest around the city, in case of activity. Kyoko's guesses about the location of the Ignis' were as accurate as they could be, which is to say Hanoi is off by quite a wide margin for most of them, and

they have no way to confirm anything without actually showing up to those locations.

It feels nice to be ahead of the curve, even if they're closer than he'd like. He feels lucky to have found their hidden stashes of custom bullets, since exploring the sewers wasn't his top priority. He was just seeking out the team Kyoko told him was sent to look for an Ignis he knows is already taken, when he came across the boxes. He knew of the existence of this stash thanks to Kyoko as well, but she didn't know in which area of the city it was hidden. He, quite literally, dodged a bullet by finding these.

Naturally, he should just get rid of them in their entirety, but he feels like doing business and being charitable, while he's at it.

"So you'll only give me half? Stingy," Ghost Girl says, smiling at him from behind her mask, leaning against the bar while standing. They're on the outskirts of Den City, facing the direction from which they would eventually reach New Domino, at a typical meeting spot for bastards like them. "How much?"

It's a small, almost unnoticeable bar tucked into the back of an abandoned gas station just off the highway, which smells like piss on the best days and mold and dead bodies on the worst. Most of the time it's empty, unless something really good for the black market comes around—but Ryoken would rather have this meeting in the remnants of daylight rather than have this product blow up. He doesn't fancy getting killed.

Revolver hums, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair. "Depends on who you'll sell it to."

Ghost Girl's eyebrows raise, a scoff leaving her lips, hands landing on her hips as she steps off the bar to glare at him with her entire physique. Revolver just tilts his head, unimpressed, so after a few minutes of staring at each other in silent conversation, she throws her hands up in the air in exasperation and shakes her head.

"You're just about the worst mercenary I've ever met," she rolls her eyes with the full indignation of a woman far too used to indulging fools, but

Revolver would never tell her that she has a soft heart. It would make her angry, and he has enough targets on his back already. “Fine, I’ll make no replicas and sell my batch to the city hall. Is that enough for you, mister neutral?”

Revolver sighs, and he can see that she can tell what’s coming. “I’ll give them to you *for free* if you find out who is making the originals and where, and call me to help you dismantle the whole operation. And you have to make it clear to the city hall this is a one-time thing—they won’t get more evidence like *this* to buy for their case against Hanoi unless I say so.”

“Ridiculous.”

Ghost Girl steps closer to him and takes a deep breath, looking up at his mask with curious eyes. He can tell she wants the free product—she’s an entrepreneur when it comes to selling evidence to the city because they put out more money than any mercenary who would actually use something like this, and it allows her to keep playing double agent with her clients. She’s sloppy most of the time in her work, but Revolver can appreciate ambition. She hasn’t disappointed him too badly yet.

He can also tell, though, that she really wants some new gossip to go along with this, particularly about why he wants the authorities to have this amount of evidence against Hanoi, since it isn’t the first time he has tasked her with something like this—not that he’ll give her that, of course. He likes to call it a precaution, in case some of their criminals try to buy their way out. It’s hard to deny hard physical evidence, and the authorities will always spin it so it’ll be allowed in court.

Corruption makes a part of him scoff internally, but mostly he finds it fun, since he couldn’t care less about politics right now. Besides, he’s actually only giving Ghost Girl a fourth part of the stash he found, since she would be tempted and he doesn’t want the police force to get their own ideas about mass production. He wouldn’t want to arm the city against him, so he’s barely giving them enough bullets to test. If they even try it, they won’t have much evidence left to show.

He'll see to the rest of the stash hidden deep in his basement for his own testing.

"You're too easy to negotiate with," Revolver shrugs, and Ghost Girl lifts her shoulders like she's about to give him a piece of her mind, but he should get going. Spectre will have a report on sightings for him soon. "Deal or I'm leaving."

"Fine," Ghost Girl shoots her hand out and Revolver grabs it and bends down, kissing the back of it instead of shaking it. It makes her roll her eyes even harder than before. "You're the worst. If you didn't have such juicy products for me I wouldn't even think of dealing with you. See if I ever answer your call again after this scam."

"You're the one getting things for free," Revolver reminds her as he straightens up, and Ghost Girl pulls her hand from his grip with a scowl. "I'll see you when you have the information I want."

Instead of answering, she waves him off towards the door, and then sits on a bar stool in order to examine the bullets again. She holds one up against the light as if it were a diamond, and Revolver can already imagine the absolute heart-stopping price she'll charge city hall for them.

As he makes his way into the city on a standard bike he picked out after dropping Miyu off, he pockets the Revolver mask in order to appear inconspicuous, and heads to his apartment instead of the mansion. While he lives in his childhood home eighty-percent of the time, Ryoken keeps an apartment in which to house things he feels would be safer elsewhere but aren't that important—mostly files, and certain articles of clothing he's ruined as Revolver, but also back-up ammo caches, and a lot of coffee. He's dropping off the stash of bullets because it would take him all day to take the boxes back and forth to the mansion, to pick up later in the car, and he could really use a shower, and a moment to himself.

Only Spectre and Miyu know about this apartment, of course. Ryoken made an effort so that his name would not be on any records of renting it, and his landlord doesn't even know who he is. It serves as a nice deposit and reference-slash-surveillance spot in the city, and as a nice place to wind

down when he feels like taking a moment to breathe. It's practically bare, the walls painted white but a little stained, a couch and a coffee table sitting in a corner and otherwise surrounded by boxes upon boxes of miscellaneous items Ryoken has dropped off.

It's a one-bedroom-one-bathroom, so the kitchen is also small, only housing a two-burner electric stove, a small fridge and a coffee machine. The bedroom only has a mattress pushed against the far wall and a laundry basket, and the bathroom is the room that gets used the most, so everything is in perfect working condition. While it's not a *nice* place, because he doesn't take that much care of it, it's inconspicuous yet comfortable, and when he bothers to part the curtains, it has a rather non-offensive view of the city, considering the building it rests upon is not as tall as others around it, letting in a nice amount of natural light. The only regret is that there's no A/C unit to keep the place tolerable during the summer, but Ryoken usually spends his summers swimming anyways—when he's not busy, that is.

The mansion's much safer, technically, and far more functional, considering Ryoken doesn't have a laptop or a PC in this apartment, or internet connection. But he knows Hanoi watches it sometimes. They make it obvious, and by now most of them must believe they're just keeping an eye on a kid that *might* know some things about them, instead of on their former leader. He doesn't know if its mind control or if most of the people that worked under him are dead or fired, but he doesn't care much—they don't get in his way, and it's been a while since they've done anything other than sit menacingly in a car right where the security cameras can catch them. Ryoken called the police on them several times, because it's what a civilian would do if they saw cars parked on their private property at three a.m. It's funny to see them scramble.

They obviously have no idea he's housing the Ignis, but to be fair, they should be next to undetectable in his basement with all the preparations he made, and even then there's no danger to them being in other parts of the house. If he's being honest, Ryoken just likes to have another place to sleep at sometimes—he sleeps better in this apartment than he does home, for obvious reasons he doesn't care to analyze right now.

He'll take that chance to shower and get changed, to wash off the bitterness of the whiskey and cigarettes from earlier via brushing his teeth, and get rid of some of that leftover sewer stench he's carrying. There's splatters of blood over his knuckles and his clothes, since went overboard today with his strength—he felt like punching something really hard, and that meant he didn't get to interrogate the Hanoi members he found, but he doubts that they would have had any information anyways.

As he undresses and drops the clothes in the laundry basket, Ryoken can't help but sigh to himself, recalling his encounter with Fujiki. He's been ignoring the need for him to do something like that ever since Playmaker took the Ignis, but after talking to Kyoko and leaving her to die today, Ryoken realized he could not allow himself to have any piece of Fujiki Yusaku anymore, no matter how small. To scare him off like this is the quickest route to Playmaker resenting Revolver, which is also the fastest way to get him off his tail—Playmaker would be too busy trying to pick a fight with him *and* Hanoi to realize how far behind he is in the game.

The Ignis should be safe with him for now, as Revolver takes out Hanoi. His heart? Probably not so much, but it's not something Ryoken will worry about right now.

Ryoken steps under the cold water of the shower spray and shivers, then decides to call Spectre to give him an update on his whereabouts after he's done, since he should be back at the mansion right now. He makes it quick, scrubbing his skin with soap as efficiently as possible before washing off and stepping out, drying himself just as fast but thoroughly, and sitting in his underwear on the mattress, towel around his neck, to make the call.

As he unlocks his phone, Ryoken sees his screen flooding with notifications, so for a moment he worries that he missed something important—only to realize who the number that's calling him and messaging him belongs to.

He forgot to save Yusei's number when he registered his contact list in his new phone—or, more like he ignored Spectre when he told him to save it. Ryoken doesn't want to think about it too deeply or for too long, even if he wonders what the calls are all about, so he dismisses them, not feeling up

for an uncomfortable phone call right now. There's a couple of messages from Yusei as well, telling him he heard about what went on in the city yesterday and asking if he's alright, and Ryoken hesitates to answer before sending him a quick '*i'm alright, don't worry.*'

The throbbing of his hurt ankle says otherwise, but what Yusei doesn't know won't kill him.

Spectre picks up on the third ring.

"Ryoken-sama," he starts, foregoing any other greeting. He sounds quite winded, which makes Ryoken's curiosity pique, but he squashes it down to ask about later. This is a business call. "I was expecting you back by now."

"Found something of interest and decided to deviate a little from the schedule. I made a deal with Ghost Girl to give the city hall more evidence on Hanoi," Spectre makes a curious sound over the line at this, as Ryoken runs the towel over his hair to dry it off. "I'll fill you in on it later. Kyoko is probably out of the picture by now, but she gave me information we can use."

"I see," whether Spectre sounds disappointed or particularly touched by what the implications of Kyoko being out of the game mean, Ryoken can't tell. Sometimes, not even he can read Spectre, and he's glad for it. If he had the perfect map for his train of thoughts, he would be concerned about his own mental state. "Well, the Ignis are getting along—too well, perhaps. It's almost voyeuristic to watch them. They're very curious about a lot of things."

"They're bonding and learning what they couldn't through the link. It's meant to happen," Ryoken pauses, wonders if he should really address it, and decides to go for it. No use in dancing around the subject. "I'm guessing you like them just as much as they like you."

Spectre makes a sound that could almost be called hesitant, if not for his full answer. "I believe so. Is that going to be a problem?"

Ryoken takes a deep breath and traces a finger over his wounded ankle, not even flinching at the barely-there prickles of pain. Where it was practically black before it's already purplish, the edges starting to yellow, and the indentation in the center of the wound is far less swollen than the last time he checked closely; he's still impressed at how it didn't break skin, but he'll have to check the bullets himself to be sure this wasn't just him getting lucky.

He needs a longer sleep than he had last night, as well, so he might come back to the apartment tonight after all. If he's going to take down Hanoi and protect the Ignis, he needs to do so at his full potential. Being hurt and tired won't do.

"It might be good, for the future," Ryoken says, trying to keep his words light, suggestive instead of iron solid. The last thing he wants is to assume he'll be around for the aftermath, or sane enough to witness it. "They'll need guidance, once it's over. They'll have to learn to blend in. I'm sure Yusei will help, when we get to that."

"I'm surprised to hear you uttering his name," Spectre's voice sounds amused, but there's an edge of suspicion to it, like he already knows about Ryoken lying to him. It would annoy him if he didn't know how despicable of him it is. "He called me, just so you know—I told him we were fine, but he told me you weren't answering, so he was still worried."

Ryoken closes his eyes and sighs. "I texted him back, alright?"

"If you expect him to just accept the whole truth without issue once we're done, you can't just keep ignoring him—"

Like a heaven sent angel, Ryoken is suddenly spared from having this conversation again by his phone vibrating with an incoming phone call. "Hold on, I'm getting another call, we'll have to talk about this later—"

Spectre is certainly not pleased. "*Ryoken-sama*—"

There are several terrifying minutes in which Yusaku feels like he can't breathe, once he abandons the sewers.

A mix of dread and panic is clogging up his lungs, making him dizzy, but it is mostly the adrenaline and anger rushing through his blood that chokes him up. He has to stop walking and take a few moments to just *stop thinking*, because he's not even seeing where he's going, not really, so he ends up sitting down in a park bench nearby and clenching his fists, because he thinks he might actually go insane with fury otherwise.

“Yusaku-chan?” Ai calls him, but he can’t come up with a response right now, not over the sound of his frantic heartbeat in his ears. He sounds concerned, and it makes him somewhat relieved that he’s not alone. If he had processed these feelings while still in the sewers, he would have probably turned back around and jumped Revolver. “Yusaku-chan, you need to calm down.”

He takes a deep breath and presses his hands over his face, rubbing his eyes with his fingers, trying to will the tension away from his body and relax his jaw, but Yusaku doesn’t think he’s ever felt this *raw* in his life, this exposed on an emotional level. He has no doubt that if someone came across him like this, venom would drip from his tongue, and he’d struggle to hold himself back from confrontation.

It’s the darkest side of him, the side that’s so angry at his past, his life, and his circumstances. The side of him that resembles a rabid dog and makes him understand why Revolver rarely uses his fists, since it would be impossible to wash the blood off himself if he did, since it would take months before he could forget the sound, the sight, and feeling of a person giving their last breath.

He’s been incredibly, astonishingly blind and naïve. *Of course* he shouldn’t have taken any of Revolver’s actions and words at face value, ever. He knows nothing about him, and he let himself be tricked into accepting that and not diving deeper, probing harder. A thought runs through his mind, one that wonders if he’s more hurt about the breach of trust or the fact that he gave a part of himself to this man. Yusaku shuts it down within seconds of processing it.

“Yusaku-chan, can you look at me?” Ai asks, so Yusaku swallows, willing himself to uncover his face and look at his lap. Ai has climbed over and returned to his original form, and Yusaku would have scolded him for doing so in public if he gave half a fuck right now. “Oh— that’s a scary look, I actually wasn’t prepared for that.”

Bitterness clogs up his throat. “*Shut up.* I need to think about what to do now, and I can’t do that if you’re babbling.”

“Well, I don’t agree!” Ai crosses his arms, and for a moment Yusaku pictures just grabbing him and stuffing him back in his pocket, but he discards the thought. It wouldn’t shut him up. “In fact, I *strongly* disagree! I believe you’re getting ahead of yourself because your man-crush said some shocking things and you’re already picturing how to hide his body!”

Well, he’s not entirely wrong. “What do you care?”

Ai makes a sound that would probably get captions and a replay if this were some kind of TV show, to really accentuate how overdone it is. It is something between a gasp and a protest, entirely too high pitched to help Yusaku’s blood pressure, but he follows up with actual words right after, so Yusaku can’t actually tell him to shut up again.

“Excuse you! I care very deeply,” Ai enunciates every word with his hands, pointing accusingly at him and then gesturing at himself, as if Yusaku is meant to take any meaning from it. “You’re my partner! My destined! My kin! My—”

“I thought I said you were a hostage.”

Ai splutters, his words dying, and actually pokes Yusaku’s face with a finger, his arm stretching out like rubber in order to reach. “We worked together! Besides, we confirmed today that I know nothing of whatever it is that you want out of this whole thing.”

“Then you’re an asset at best,” Yusaku says, almost spitting out the words. He’ll admit to himself, later, that he’s just taking it out on him, targeting his anger in order to feel more in control of the situation, that he doesn’t really

mean this. But that will be *later*. Nothing can stop him right now. “And what do you mean, ‘*whatever it is that I want*’? I want to take down Hanoi and find the root of why you even exist in the first place, in order to put that bastard where he belongs—”

“I don’t see you doing that, though!” Ai shakes his head, frowning, seemingly genuinely frustrated with him. “You’re chasing Revolver-related crumbs! That’s what I’ve seen you doing, at least. Asking *me* about him, interacting with him when he gave you the green light to leave, and trying to put together his relation to us instead of actually hunting down Hanoi!”

Suddenly, the anger in Yusaku’s veins freezes, a new feeling of denial creeping up on him. “That’s *not*—”

“Yes, it is! You went to the mountain, because you had to, but in between chasing Hanoi what were you thinking of!?”

Yusaku flinches. “Ai—”

“I know you!” Ai pokes his face again, more aggressively now, and this time Yusaku *feels it* for what it is: a call for him to get his shit together. “You might think it unlikely, considering how little we’ve been together, but I know you! And because of that, no matter what, you have to trust me as much as I trust you!”

Yusaku wants to deny it, and point out that that’s not how trust works—but he can’t. Not only because he’s speechless at Ai’s sudden brashness, but also because he’s just simply right. No matter how much he ignores it, Yusaku can feel a bond between them, a bond that’s latched on ever since he first found Ai and just keeps on growing deeper, stronger, and more obvious. As non-intrusive as it is, almost like when you choose to be aware of your own breathing, it’s still there.

They’re meant to be this way, whether he likes it or not, and Yusaku would be even stupider than he’s already been to refuse it.

Yusaku swallows and takes a deep breath, once again, but this time he allows himself to feel it through the anger, to let it wash over him. It takes

him a few minutes, during which Ai looks at him with a surprising amount of patience, probably able to tell that he's trying.

"What would you propose I do, then?" Yusaku ends up asking, feeling like most of his energy's been drained by Ai's intensity. He hates to admit it, down to his very bones, but he's right. He's thought too much about Revolver and Hanoi, instead of focusing on Hanoi alone.

Ai hums, and has the audacity to sit on his lap. Yusaku looks around as he thinks, making sure there's no one actually around that can actually see them, but he's in a park he doesn't even know the name of and screams midnight drug deals. There's no one around in the evening twilight.

"I think you need to really look at the whole picture, Yusaku-chan, instead of focusing on a few puzzle pieces," Ai speaks up, but Yusaku doesn't look back down at him. He stares at the trees instead, glances up at the pinkish sky, shivers at the breeze flowing through his hair. Perhaps he needed Ai to call him out, or anyone to call him out, more than he thought. "I'm sure Revolver-san is pretty cool when he's not being terrifying, but he's not the center of this, as far as I understand."

Yusaku blinks and nods, sighing. "Not at all. But he knows something."

"Then, if Revolver-san really knows something but refuses to work with you, you have to look at what you know about him already instead of rushing to conclusions because of new information, and really trust your gut instinct," Ai pokes his belly, which has Yusaku looking down at him to see him shrugging, as if it were that easy to get spiraling thoughts out of his head. "He might have just tried to spook you by telling you he knows about Playmaker, and he doesn't actually know anything. Or he may know it, but won't actually do anything about it because he knows that that's not what's important right now, and maybe he's never even cared about identities. Who knows, really?"

"You have a really odd way of telling me I'm obsessed," Yusaku mumbles as an answer, and Ai shakes his head, shrugging again. Well, at least he isn't denying the accusation.

“Honestly, Yusaku-chan, from what I’ve seen of that guy, he’s more likely to come around than one would initially think,” Ai lets out a sigh, which mirrors Yusaku’s own. He realizes, and it makes him a little embarrassed, that Ai is actually good company, and generally good at conversation where Yusaku lacks the skill. “I’m not saying forget about him—if you feel something is off, then it’s probably true, but that doesn’t mean it’s related to the Hanoi thing. I say, focus on the big target, see if he comes around, and deal with him as he comes.”

“You’re better at advice than I thought you’d be,” Yusaku admits, bringing up a hand to rub his eyes again. That initial rush of anger, that adrenaline—it has pulled him too tight today, and paired with the leftover adrenaline from yesterday, there’s no energy left in him. “I don’t think I have it in me to go investigate Hanoi right now, though.”

Ai looks brings a hand up to his chin and hums, then lights up considerably, an idea visibly popping into his head. “Then, do something to relax! I’m sure nothing bad will happen until tomorrow. Even Hanoi has to sleep, right?”

“I guess?”

Ai grins. “Then, what do you wanna do?”

Yusaku frowns and thinks about what could relax him. Perhaps having a drink with some company, but he feels that any conversation that he has with Takeru or Kusanagi-san right now will end up back here, and he really doesn’t want to think about this anymore today, in order to avoid a headache.

A thought pops into Yusaku’s head, and he kind of hates it at the same time that he likes it, even if it’s kind of a bad idea. Instead of answering Ai at all, Yusaku stands up and starts walking, making his way to the bus stop to see where exactly he wandered off to during his panic. He’s pleased to see that he’s apparently not that far off downtown, so he orients himself and heads back to his apartment on foot. He needs the walk.

Ai protests his silence, initially, but eventually he just relaxes back into his hoodie pocket, apparently enjoying the peacefulness himself. It takes Yusaku maybe thirty minutes or so to get to his building, just in time to see Takeru and Kusanagi-san arriving back from a shift. They look relieved to see him, and Takeru actually rushes forwards.

“I forgot my wallet,” is what Yusaku says when he’s within earshot, to which Takeru makes a sound akin to a whale and shakes his head, sighing like a disappointed mother and softly pushing at his shoulder with a hand. “Sorry.”

Takeru waves the same hand through the air and shrugs. “Believe me, milk is the last of our worries right now.”

The wording makes Yusaku raise an eyebrow, and he suddenly remembers the messages and phone calls he ignored. Kusanagi-san approaches as well, but instead of immediately scolding him like he’s clearly gearing up to, he frowns and sniffs the air.

“Were you in the sewers?”

Yusaku ignores the question. “Did something happen?”

“Well, you see, remember how I asked if I was going to find one of Ai’s cousins in the shower?” Takeru asks, and it’s clearly a redundant question that only makes Yusaku more confused than concerned—though, it’s more of a healthy combination, if he’s being honest. “Yeah, turns out I shouldn’t open my mouth *ever*—”

“Did an Ignis interrupt your shower?” Yusaku snaps, and Ai wriggles around in his hoodie pocket in what Yusaku can *feel* is excitement, peeking his head out to watch them talk. Takeru shrugs, helpless, and Yusaku stares back and forth between him and Kusanagi-san.

“He interrupted breakfast, actually,” Kusanagi-san elaborates, taking pity on Yusaku’s perplexed reaction. “We should go inside.”

Yusaku doesn't argue, and is the first down the stairs and to the door. He doesn't think he's fully processed the fact that Takeru found an Ignis in his shower, or that this means they're technically one step up ahead of Hanoi, unless they've also been busy today. He expects to be greeted by something similar to when he came home to Ai having turned into a vampire, but instead he's quite unexpectedly assaulted by a large, black-and-red cat latching onto his hoodie to jump over to his shoulder, and then use that momentum to jump right at Takeru.

It has him stumbling on his feet for a second, so Yusaku turns and walks backward into the apartment just to keep his eye on the cat, which almost results in him tripping over the coffee table. So much for footsteps lighter than a rat's.

He's expecting to see Takeru's face being shredded, but instead the cat has wrapped itself around his shoulders, somehow balancing itself well enough to not even wobble as Takeru walks further into the apartment, looking like he'd rather be anywhere but here. Yusaku actually wonders what he's doing here, considering he has his own place, but the cat seems to be the rather obvious answer.

"Yusaku," Takeru starts, pauses, then sighs, as if accepting this is his life. "This is Flame. Flame, this is Yusaku."

The cat looks right at him with eerie yellow eyes, and, like out of a horror movie or a really bad comedy, or some bizarre combination of both, speaks. "Fujiki Yusaku, it is a pleasure to meet you."

The cat, Flame, doesn't actually move his mouth, and Yusaku doesn't know if he finds that more disturbing than if he had. Unable to find words for this, Yusaku just opens and closes his mouth for a few seconds, feeling Ai wiggle in his pocket. "...likewise, I guess."

"I look forward to our partnership," Flame continues, clearly not knowing that it's really freaky to hear a cat talk with such a deep voice. "Takeru has filled me in on your work, and I think it's very noble."

“That is an awfully polite cat,” Yusaku points out, to which Takeru shrugs. He seems tired, but jumpy, and it makes Yusaku think that there’s more to this than he isn’t saying. Again, the cat does not budge. “Well, it’s a nice change, considering Ai—”

As if waiting for a prompt, Ai finally jumps out of his pocket, turning into a kitten mid-air and immediately rushing towards Takeru, who panics and takes a couple of steps back, colliding with Kusanagi-san and almost hitting him on the chin with the back of his head. Flame, who is apparently no fool, jumps off his shoulders to meet Ai in the middle, and the three of them watch them stare at each other.

In Yusaku’s opinion, Ai should have gone for a dog. He’s waving his tail more rapidly than he’s ever seen an actual cat do, and he’s even starting to purr. He has no time to wonder why Ai picked a kitten instead of an adult cat before the creepy talking begins again.

“Hello!” Ai starts, and crawls closer to Flame. He looks very tiny next to Flame’s large, graceful cat, who just extends a paw for Ai to swat at, almost like in imitation of a handshake. Yusaku looks up to both Takeru and Kusanagi-san to confirm he isn’t going insane, but they both look as if they’re asking him the same thing. “I’m Ai! I’m very excited. Wanna cuddle~?”

Flame blinks very slowly, as if thinking over the question. Now, Yusaku knows cats are definitely intelligent beings, since he’s seen several cats make that same expression. “I think I would like that. It would be a far more effective method of exchanging information.”

Ai tackles him with a happy, badly enunciated ‘*meow*’, and Yusaku decides to stop watching after that, for his own sake. He won’t even question the cuddling request. It’s best to turn a blind eye to some things. He has about two seconds to wonder where Jin is before he hears noise coming from the kitchen, turns, and watches him step back into his room with two handfuls of snacks and his gaming headphones on. He’s, most certainly, the sanest of them all.

“I told him not to take them all,” Kusanagi-san says, takes determined steps towards Jin’s room, but pauses at the door to look back at Yusaku. “I’m glad you’re okay, by the way, but don’t pull that again. I’m of a mind to ground you.”

“Thank you,” Yusaku shrugs, and then turns towards Takeru. “Any more news?”

Takeru looks off to the side, scratching the back of his head, which usually means yes, but his answer doesn’t add up to his body language. “Eh, not really. Why?”

“I have news, but it can wait for tomorrow. I’m just taking all of today off while I’m at it,” Yusaku sighs and shakes his head. “I need to make a phone call, and shower. I’m going on a date—I think.”

Takeru blinks. “What!?”

Notes for the Chapter:

see ya freaks next week and hope you liked it!

also don't forget to drop a cookie in a comment. it's common courtesy.



11. understudy (part 2)

Notes for the Chapter:

($\widehat{\circ}$ 5 $\widehat{\circ}$)

also just fyi this chapter and the previous part were almost called
"horny shall be thy name"

Ryoken hangs up on Spectre with no remorse, and he's about to accept the incoming phone call with no second thoughts, until he looks at the caller ID.

Fujiki Yusaku.

Interesting, to say the least.

"Hello?"

"Ryoken," Fujiki rushes out in a breath, as if he's been calling Ryoken for hours instead of just waiting for a few rings. He's even more interested in this turn of events now. "Uh, hi."

"Hi again," Ryoken squints and, realizing he should not have this phone call practically naked, stands up to scour the tiny closet in the bedroom for clothes. He winds up with a shirt with what looks like bullet holes in it and sweatpants he's positive he hasn't worn in a couple of years. It's better than nothing. "Not that I'm complaining, but this is quite an unexpected call."

"I know, sorry about that," Fujiki pauses and audibly takes a deep breath. It makes Ryoken stand still in the middle of the room, one arm inside the shirt as he waits for him to continue, like he has to brace himself for something. "I was just wondering if you're free right now."

Ryoken squints harder, suspicious, and thinks of Spectre waiting for him. "Depends on what you need me for."

“Well, I’d like to go on that date, if you’re alright with that.”

Ryoken opens his mouth and closes it, his brain coming to a halt. He expected just about *anything* but this, especially after the incident in the sewers. He’s not quite sure how to react.

“A date? As in, today?” Ryoken asks, sure that his voice demonstrates very clearly how confused he is about this. He drops the shirt he’s trying to put on in order to focus. “What brought this on?”

Fujiki doesn’t answer right away, and the line is completely silent for longer than socially acceptable; the sewers flashback in his mind and Ryoken has to close his eyes, resisting the urge to sigh. It was foolish of him to think it would be simple, of course, or that he could have this, that he could be all Fujiki Yusaku needs or wants, which is why he made that choice as Revolver. The truth of the matter is that the Kogami Ryoken that Fujiki knows is a *ruse*: he’s a liar and a puppet for Revolver to live out childish fantasies of a normal life, a toy that stepped out of line by inviting Fujiki on a date, so this shouldn’t be happening at all right now.

But it is, and he’ll have to commit to it. Act as if he’s truly living out that fantasy. After all, Revolver lost Playmaker earlier today, so it only makes sense that Kogami Ryoken would lose Fujiki Yusaku as well. After today, Ryoken will claim that he’s too busy with med school prep to make it to a follow up date, and eventually whatever Fujiki thinks he’ll find in him will fade from his mind. Whatever feelings he has for that facsimile of a human being will disappear. Playmaker will hate him, as he’s meant to, and Ryoken will get the ending he’s always planned for.

There shouldn’t be a dagger through his chest at the thought, but he made his bed and laid on it. It’s about time he deals with the consequences.

“I just felt like I owed you it, since I’ve kept you waiting for so long,” Fujiki speaks up, clearing his throat like he realized how long he’s been silent. “Don’t misinterpret that, though. I do want a date with you, and I have the rest of today free.”

Ryoken resists the urge to say something about pity. He doesn't doubt that Fujiki is interested in who he thinks he is, but he has a tendency to be painfully transparent outside of the Playmaker suit, so it's evident that his encounter with Revolver has shaken up something in him, and he's trying to use him as an escape goat.

He has no issue with this, since he knew Fujiki would eventually say yes either way, that he does see something in Ryoken's made-up character that rings true to who he really is, but it's hurtful, in a way, to see that the less genuine version of himself is the one he's seeking out, instead of suiting up and going after Revolver. He told himself that the whole goal of a date was to see which of them he preferred, of course, but the Ignis wasn't a chess piece on the board when he decided to do it. It's worse than any ankle wound.

"You know what? I'll take that," Ryoken says, trying to sound kinder than he feels. Sometimes it's like this, when it comes to Fujiki; he feels like an open wound and he can't think straight and he has to hold back that intensity, since it has no place on the face of a trust fund baby med student. "How about dinner in an hour, then? Your choice, my treat."

"...actually, can we meet right now?"

Ryoken silently curses. So, he truly won't be able to go home and change into something better. "Sure! Name the place."

Fujiki chooses a yakisoba place that Ryoken knows for a fact is within a couple blocks of his apartment. Predictable, that he would go for something on the cheaper side and close to a safe place, but not unwelcome, since at least he knows the shop has good food and offers more than just yakisoba.

Ryoken is there early, because he recalls this place being packed most Saturday nights, and it's a good thing too, since a line to go in has already formed. It's a small little shop that just opened up this year, two stories high yet very, very tight inside, with mood lanterns that give it a charming air and wooden walls and floors, but it's gotten quite famous over the last couple of months, and the casualness of it at least means Ryoken is not making a fool out of himself for showing up in black jeans that he's

definitely used as Revolver once, if the smell of gunpowder he washed off meant anything, a faded from age white tee, and a camo jacket.

He wouldn't be surprised if the business owners open up either another location in town, move the place entirely, or establish a delivery service. The food is *that* good, and Ryoken is admittedly hungrier with every minute that passes with how the scent of it wafts in the air, making his mouth water—he's about to call Fujiki to confirm whether he'll be late or not, but he barely moves his hands towards his back pocket before he hears his voice calling his name.

Ryoken turns and looks over the mass of people accumulating close to the entrance as the line grows, and catches Fujiki's head turned away from him—it's a wonder he didn't see him, since he's just a little distance away, but it is getting dark, and there's quite a lot of people around. Ryoken is positive someone grabbed him earlier, but he isn't sure of it enough to call out a stranger.

Creating some distance in between the wall he's been leaning against in order to reach and stretching his arm, Ryoken taps his shoulder, and Fujiki snaps his head towards him, eyes widening when he realizes it's him, before walking over so they won't lose their place.

"Sorry I'm late," is what he greets Ryoken with, sounding breathless, his cheeks flushed. "I uh, had to double check some things."

"I hope I didn't make you run," Ryoken smiles, taking Fujiki in from head to toe—he's dressed up, considering he's not wearing a hoodie. His hair is wind swept and he has a brand-new looking elbow length baby-blue button up shirt on, though his pants look similar to the ones he wears to class. Ryoken feels charmed, despite the simplicity of it, and he's also glad he's wasn't the only one in a hurry. "You look really nice."

"Uh, thank you." Fujiki looks down at himself as if to confirm this words, and nods to himself. He seems vaguely disoriented, yet his eyes widen when he takes in Ryoken's own appearance. He hopes he doesn't look nearly as tired as the feeling creeping in implies. "You look... *so good*."

Ryoken snorts as Fujiki's face turns pinker. "Thank you."

Fujiki opens his mouth to say something, but someone steps too close to Ryoken on accident and pushes his back. It occurs to him, right at this moment, that his ankle still hurts even though he's not limping, so he's unprepared, but he's already stumbling forwards, wincing in pain. Fujiki brings his hands up to his shoulders to help him stay on his feet, but he's clearly not prepared for his weight, so he ends up leaning against the wall as Ryoken's weight pushes him.

Ryoken brings his hands up against the wall to keep himself from crushing Fujiki, but the result is them standing entirely too close to be socially acceptable—as he raises his face to look at Fujiki, he feels the ghost of his breath against his jaw and freezes, eyes connecting with his.

Startled green eyes and flushed cheeks meet his gaze, and Ryoken's momentarily breathless. Fujiki has a simple, cold beauty that captures looks, but it's the eyes that have always done it for Ryoken, that make his chest go tight. He stands for too many seconds, lingering in this stance as if frozen in time, as Fujiki's expression hesitates between vulnerable and guarded.

Then, like a spectacular wrecking ball, the memory of standing not unlike this in front of him not three hours ago as Revolver invades his mind with its familiarity, as do the hundreds of times Revolver's crowded Playmaker against a wall and taken that extra space, sealed the remaining distance. It's like cold water suddenly starts running down his back, and has him hastily stepping back, wincing again at the throb of his ankle.

"Sorry," he says, licking his lips and clenching his hands into fists in order to resist the urge to touch, to step back in, and to fall into that familiar embrace. He has to get used to not having the right to anymore—as if he ever did in the first place. "I was sort of pushed—"

"It's fine," Fujiki rushes the words in a breath, and then sighs as his eyes flutter, his hands nervously gesturing towards Ryoken's feet. "You seem hurt."

“Ah, I got into a little scuffle yesterday. Nothing to worry about,” Ryoken smiles through the words, burying his clenched fists in his pockets, relaxing his shoulders. Better to act natural.

Fujiki’s eyebrows raise, and for a second a calculating look enters his eyes—probably wondering why Ryoken’s not babbling about having met Playmaker and Soulburner last night, or at least why he doesn’t elaborate more on it. Ryoken holds his gaze, lowers his eyelashes just so, and Fujiki blinks rapidly, cheeks suddenly turning pink again.

Too easy.

“I wouldn’t pin you as the type to get into fights,” Fujiki steps closer to him, and their shoulders brush as they both turn towards the entrance. The line is moving, which means they’re probably going in now. “Physical ones, that’s is. I’ve heard you destroyed the debate team and the chess club.”

“And the Duel Monsters club, yeah,” Ryoken bites down a smile, turning his head to stare at Fujiki’s profile. The corners of his lips are turned up in that tiny, shy grin of his, and something about the buzzing of people’s voices around them and the way the yellow lights of the outside of the shop’s hit his features makes Ryoken’s vision tunnel, like he’s burning his moment into his memory. He’s barely aware of himself speaking. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, don’t you think so?”

Fujiki tilts his head to the side, but doesn’t turn towards him, staring intently at the shop’s entrance. Ryoken catches a side eye despite his efforts. “That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it?”

Ryoken doesn’t answer, but he ends up steeling himself before taking a careful, tentative hold of Fujiki’s closest hand—fingers twitch against his, but Fujiki’s palm turns towards his, and perhaps it’s a bit early to be intertwining fingers, but Ryoken’s used to finding loopholes.

Enjoy this while you can, he tells himself, resisting the urge to close his eyes and sigh to savor the moment. He leads Fujiki into the shop instead, as a waiter waves a menu at them the second they’re under the threshold.

Ryoken leads them to the second floor, because it's less stuffy where there are open windows, and Fujiki picks out a table for two tucked into a corner, where they could perhaps have a little privacy. It's cozy to be inside, and not nearly as warm as one would think of a place packed with people; the A/C is clearly at full power, and Ryoken appreciates it, since he wouldn't want to sweat in this jacket.

"I'm starving," Fujiki mumbles as he sits, nodding in thanks at a waiter that approaches them with wet towels to wash their hands but never taking his eyes off Ryoken, not even to look around them. "What are you having?"

Ryoken shrugs. Now that they're inside, his stomach is really catching up with him. He should have had more than just that salad for lunch. "This place has amazing yakisoba and okonomiyaki, so I'll be happy with that and a beer."

Fujiki nods, biting his lips as if holding back a smile. "I'll order for us, then. We can share the okonomiyaki."

Ryoken agrees, and he's pleased at how Fujiki orders the biggest portions without hesitation—he must be as famished as Ryoken, and he's not about to risk having to rummage through his fridge later. Sometimes, fast metabolism *is* a curse. Fujiki opts for a soda instead of beer, which is just fine by Ryoken, but he's had a long day and a lot of things on his mind. He can afford to loosen up a little as long as he doesn't overdo it.

It's not sake, so it's unlikely Spectre will scold him for even thinking of drinking. He doesn't have to know about the whiskey.

"So, considering you rather suddenly said yes, I've been wondering what made you change your mind," Ryoken asks, once their waiter leaves, leaning his elbows on the table to close some of the space between them. Fujiki fumbles with his hands for a second at this, as if not knowing how to progress, so Ryoken playfully nudges one of his feet with his own. "Relax."

Fujiki splutters when he sees Ryoken winking, and settles for crossing his arms over the table.

“I didn’t just change my mind, you know,” Fujiki rolls his eyes, ducking his chin and grinning. Ryoken is nothing short of mesmerized with the unexpected coyness and shyness of the gesture, and he has no idea if Fujiki’s doing it on purpose or not. “I just... I just really wanted to see you.”

“Fuck,” Ryoken blurts out, startling both of them, and shakes his head with a snort. Fujiki’s eyes are wide, but he seems amused at the outburst. “Sorry, you’re just... you’re gorgeous. And sweet.”

Ryoken doesn’t think he’s seen Fujiki turn tomato red as fast as he does in that second, unless he counts those times Revolver had Playmaker gasping—but it’s better to push those thoughts out of his head. He has a moment of self-awareness, right that second, in which he wonders what the fuck he’s doing, being this honest, this straightforward.

He should dial it back, make this date painfully average so Fujiki won’t have second thoughts, but Ryoken finds that the thought of lying about *this*, about how right they could be together, would be too much even for him. He’s lied about his past, he’s lied about who he is, he’s lied about his intentions; it seems he’s found a line that he can’t actually cross.

Ryoken decides to take that as a sign that he still has a heart, though he’s not that happy about it.

“You can’t just say stuff like that,” Fujiki huffs, his eyes darting around their table, visibly trying to regain some control over this situation. “Are you a professional flirt, or what?”

“Just for you,” Ryoken winks, again, and Fujiki shakes his head, pressing his lips together to suppress a grin. Ryoken stares at him openly, probably giving away how, deep down, he’d really like to keep this. In order to get that thought off his head, Ryoken decides to continue their conversation. “So, what is it about me that made you decide I would be a good pick me up after a bad day?”

Fujiki raises an eyebrow. “How do you know I had a bad day?”

Ryoken bites his tongue—he doesn't want to address the obvious in his head. “Call it a hunch—also, if that was an attempt at changing the subject, it sucked.”

“I had to try it,” Fujiki grins, adding just the right amount of sass to his one. His eyes are honest and shining and entirely too captivating, making it far too easy for Ryoken to get lost in them. He almost misses it when he speaks up again. “And, I don’t know. I guess you make me feel... you have a very soothing presence, when you want it to be. I like that about you.”

“Would you call it peaceful?” Ryoken swallows, wondering if it’s evident how much the words hit home. If he could, if he *wanted to*, he would inform Fujiki that it is a lie—nothing about Ryoken is ever peaceful, or soothing. Usually, it’s a world of pain and anguish drowned out by anger, and the bruise on his ankle is only proof of that. He would never be enough for him, since he wouldn’t be able to even give him that peace. Not really.

But Fujiki doesn’t know, and Ryoken won’t tell him.

“I think so, yes. You know, I’ve always been curious—”

“—what a shocker—”

“—but do you have any family?”

Ryoken freezes. He stares at Fujiki, trying to not give away the instant tension the mention of family brings to his body, and wonders if he’s suspecting something of him right now. If he’s finally seen all the red flags, if Ryoken’s gotten his motivations to go on this date on the same day he found Revolver wrong, but this is where he sighs, nods, and decides to just play into his role, instead of overthinking it.

“I guess I did, but I didn’t really know my parents,” Ryoken says, keeping his voice low, and smiles at the way Fujiki’s eyes widen a little. “My mom died when I was very young, so I didn’t really know her. My dad... I never really had a good relationship with him. He was very distant, very absent... and then he died in a freak accident. I lived with a cousin for about a year

after that, all the way in New Domino, but I ended up moving back here for my last couple of years of high school. One of my dad's friend took me in."

Ryoken's always been good at half-truths, but even he wonders if this is too revealing. Fujiki, however, doesn't seem to linger much on any of this information, and just nods along to his words. He asks the last question he expected from all that.

"I didn't know you have a cousin. Are you two close?"

It's genuine curiosity and rather innocent, from the way Fujiki looks at him, but Ryoken hesitates. He doesn't think about Yusei often, or at least tries not to in between everything else he has to keep his mind on. There's things that Ryoken just can't say to him, and it puts a cliff wide distance between them that wasn't there before his father's accident. If there is something Ryoken would have done differently all those years ago, it'd be taking back the cold shoulder he's now gotten used to giving him.

Ryoken finds himself being honest. "We were, but I kind of drifted away from him. I didn't mean for it to get so bad, and now I'm just sort of embarrassed about it. But other than that—we're fine. He cares a lot."

"I'm glad," Fujiki hums, just loud enough to be heard over the sounds of other customers around them talking and eating. His expression's gone soft now, and Ryoken doesn't know how to deal with that—with the feeling that he understands, even though his life has been completely different from his in several ways. "Should I air out my own dirty laundry, then?"

Ryoken shakes his head, smiling. He appreciates the attempt at a mood switch. "Only if you want to, of course. But I'll be really upset if it tops mine."

Yusaku's eyes twinkle, which is as playful as he's going to get, but his words are as blunt as a hammer. "I grew up in an orphanage and was in and out of foster homes a lot. I just couldn't seem to fit in. I have no hard feelings about it, though."

Ryoken doubts that, but he'd rather steer clear of this subject—it's too deep for a first date, anyways. "Any funny story about those foster homes, then?"

Fujiki tilts his head to the side, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Well, I'm pretty sure one of the couples that took me in had a sex dungeon."

Ryoken snorts, and it gives Fujiki the green light to explain the situation at depth. Apparently, this couple would leave him with a babysitter every Friday, despite spending the nights in their home, and would lock themselves in this one room for hours. The babysitter had strict orders to get him to bed before nine, so he never did catch them leaving the room, except for one night: Fujiki had woken up in the middle of the night to noises he couldn't identify, and walked out of his room to his foster mother wrapped up in a bathrobe, holding what seemed to be a whip.

"That can't be real," is what Ryoken keeps repeating, shaking his head, but Fujiki just insists, leaning over the table, their hands just barely brushing. "I refuse to believe that's real, it's too good to be true."

"I think it traumatized me, yeah," Fujiki agrees, and seems to gear up to elaborate on that, but their food arrives at that moment. Their waiter offers them a dessert menu, but Ryoken kindly refuses it—this place is famous for their yakisoba, not so much their sweets.

The conversation dies down as they dig into their food, which is just fine by Ryoken, since he's so hungry he's struggling to remember his manners. Fujiki uses his chopsticks to take a piece off the okonomiyaki, and it's the biggest mouthful Ryoken's seen enter his mouth, which is a testament to how hungry he is. It isn't uncomfortable at all, how the talk's been reduced to praising the food and asking for napkins and moving plates around so they'll fit on the table, and Ryoken ignores how painful it is that he could get used to this.

It isn't until Ryoken's halfway through his beer that they take a moment to breathe in anything other than their food. It's him that breaks the silence, because he sees the enjoyment in Fujiki's face and can't quite help himself.

“What is something you enjoy?” He asks, trying not to stare at how flushed he’s gotten just from the heat of the meal. Fujiki looks up at him with questioning eyes, head slightly tilted, so Ryoken elaborates, amused. “I mean, I know your major, and I know you hate the one elective we share, but I don’t think I’ve seen you enjoy something as much as you’re enjoying this food.”

In reality, Ryoken knows bits and pieces, like his aversion to sugar and his preference for practicality and caffeine. How he can’t stand it when people get in on his business and assume things. How he’d rather be honest and punished for it than lying outside of his secret identity, and how much fury actually goes through him sometimes. But that’s hardly things Fujiki,- or Playmaker, for that matter - enjoys. They are a collection of fragments of information obtained over the last five years, and they pale in comparison to the things Ryoken is actually familiar with and shouldn’t have any knowledge of.

Like the way he shivers when the back of his neck is touched, the way he swallows when his fingers drift too low over his hips and his tailbone, the way he melts when their lips meet. Personal, gut-wrenching, intimate information, and yet Ryoken wants more.

He’s always been a glutton about knowledge.

“I enjoy your company,” Fujiki answers, and Ryoken almost chokes on a sip of his beer. He side-eyes him as he cleans his chin with a napkin, but Fujiki just shoots his doe eyes at him, as if he’s truly that innocent. “I like coffee, and sour things. I like horror movies, but not because they’re scary —I actually find them kind of funny.”

“That’s most definitely an abridged list,” Ryoken shakes his head, clearing his throat, and Fujiki only shrugs again, biting his bottom lip. Suddenly, Ryoken is terribly distracted, so he’s barely aware of what he says next. “I like your eyes.”

Fujiki’s eyebrows shoot up, his eyes gleam. “And I like yours.”

Ryoken doesn't know if the beer is stronger than he thought when he asked for this brand or if it's really getting hotter in here, but either way, tension seems to charge up in the air around them. They're barely halfway through their meal and Ryoken's already breathless, practically dizzy, with how badly he wants to kiss him.

But he won't. Ryoken will keep his cool, and let Fujiki make the first move. He doesn't think he'd be able to look at himself in the mirror if he takes that step himself.

"Three things, then," Ryoken mumbles, and Fujiki twitches, probably remembering a testing lab, white walls. Screaming. Just the way Ryoken is. He's not even thinking straight anymore, not really, and it has nothing to do with the half beer he's drank. "Three things you like about me, and I'll say three things I like about you."

Fujiki licks his lips and nods, hesitating before asking: "Can I think about it?"

Ryoken snorts and shrugs. "Starts when you're ready."

They eat. For about the next five minutes or so, Ryoken finishes his plate and goes for a couple more bites of okonomiyaki before deciding to stop and slowly finish up his beer, looking at the careful way Fujiki uses his chopsticks, as if he's consciously trying to remember table manners. Ryoken wishes he wasn't so self-conscious about that, but he's flattered that Fujiki cares enough to try to impress him, even with something as small as this.

Soon, Fujiki is done with his plate as well, and surprises Ryoken by calling a waiter for a beer of his own, so Ryoken orders a second and a pitcher of water, drinking a whole glass before even opening the beer. He's not risking it.

As they click the necks of their bottles together and take a sip, Fujiki begins.

“I like your hands,” he says, and cautiously stretches out a hand to hover over Ryoken’s free hand, using a finger to trace over Ryoken’s own. It immediately gets harder to breathe, so Ryoken takes another swig of his drink. He almost wishes it were stronger. “You have long fingers. They look like a pianist’s.”

Ryoken hums, smiling, in order to hide how much this little has already gotten to him. He can barely keep eye contact, and Fujiki seems to be actively avoiding it, staring at their hands instead. “I do play, you know.”

“Really?” Fujiki asks, but he doesn’t seem to care much about the answer, seeing as he continues. “I already said I liked your eyes, but I think it bears repeating. They’re ethereal.”

Ryoken chuckles and takes a deep breath. “Haven’t you said before that you aren’t good with words? Because you’re really boosting my ego right now.”

“I like being honest, too,” Fujiki points out, and Ryoken really wishes that he didn’t have any lines to cross. That he could reach out, run his fingers over his reddened cheeks—but then again, they’re still in public. He hasn’t even paid their check. “Do you want me to go straight to the third thing?”

“If you keep me waiting any longer—” Ryoken starts, and actively keeps himself from continuing with *‘I might bust a nut.’* He needs to be civilized. “—I don’t think my heart could take it.”

Fujiki drops his chin, a smile over his lips, and Ryoken takes another swig of his drink. Fujiki, not one to be left behind, takes two, before finally making eye contact again, visibly swallowing.

“I love your kindness,” he whispers, and if Ryoken didn’t have such a trained, enhanced ear, he would have probably lost the words over the sound of the atmosphere of people around them. He says it so simply, honestly, as if the words don’t send a dagger through his chest. “I know you always shrug it off, but there’s something about you that strikes me in a way I can’t comprehend. It’s what made me want to go out with you in the first place.”

Ryoken bites his lip and raises his eyebrows. “I don’t know how you expect me to answer to something like that.”

“Just say thank you,” Fujiki suggests. “Are you going to take your turn or are you going to take this defeat?”

“I wasn’t aware we were battling,” Ryoken retorts, smirk slipping over his lips as he finishes his drink. Now that he thinks about it, he might be the slightest bit tipsy. Not nearly enough for it to justify the way he turns the hand Fujiki is still toying with to interlace their fingers, but tipsy nonetheless. “Are you prepared?”

Fujiki doesn’t answer with words, but his eyes burn. Ryoken recognizes that flame, and it makes him wonder if he’s the type to take a first date to bed, if Fujiki will drive him so far against the edge that Ryoken will find it in himself to do that, to have no choice but to book a hotel room for them.

“I’ll admit this once, and only once,” Ryoken starts, letting his eyes drift over Fujiki’s figure before fixating on his lips. “I’m obsessed with your mouth. I’m obsessed with your eyes, but you already know that, so I’m going to say I’m obsessed with the way you look at me instead.”

Fujiki’s jaw has dropped open a little, lips parted, and Ryoken leans over the table until their noses are almost brushing. It’s highly inappropriate to do this in public, of course, but no one is paying them any attention during a Saturday night after a sudden earthquake on Friday. He hears the way Fujiki’s heartbeat goes from fast to skyrocketing, how his breathing becomes heavier, feels him clenching his hand just a little tighter, and it makes him smirk more openly.

Yes, Ryoken is just as riled up—but he can’t help think it: *It’s too easy*, and he wishes it wasn’t.

“What’s the third thing, then?” Yusaku asks, his voice a timid shadow of his usual bluntness and deadpans, delicate and shaky. Even as Revolver, Ryoken doesn’t think he’s heard quite this quiet, deeply ingrained longing and anticipation coming from him, and he could probably get high on it.

Ryoken leans in just a little more, and this actually could get him someone from staff asking him to knock it off, but he likes the thrill.

“I guess you’ll have to find out later.”

Fujiki makes a sound from the back of his throat that it’s clearly meant to be a protest, but Ryoken is already leaning back on his seat and calling for the check. He pays without even letting Fujiki look at the total, though this place isn’t really expensive at all, and they step out together quietly, glancing up at the sky as a freezing cold breeze blows through them.

“Looks like it’s going to rain,” Ryoken points out, and side-eyes Fujiki as he shivers. He thinks of the awful shirt he’s wearing and sighs to himself, taking off his jacket and, without even asking, wrapping it around Fujiki’s shoulders. It makes him tense up, but not in a way that Ryoken reads as negative—in fact, Fujiki allows him to unnecessarily linger, hands over his shoulders, fingertips teasing. “You look cold.”

“Thank you,” Fujiki nods, and surprises Ryoken by grabbing his hand, tugging it in the cutest gesture he’s ever seen. “Walk me home? My place is just a couple of blocks away.”

God, Ryoken really wishes he could take him to bed instead. “Sure.”

As soon as they take three steps towards Fujiki’s place, it starts pouring. Ryoken is about to try and pull Fujiki back towards the restaurant to avoid getting wet, but their eyes meet and, under the streetlights and the rain, the green shines impossibly bright—he can’t say no when Fujiki pulls at his hand again, and then they’re off down the street.

It’s strangely familiar to run with him, even if they’re both trying to stick to human limitations, but it doesn’t keep Ryoken’s mind off how tense their silence is. When they reach his building, Fujiki just keeps pulling him down the stairs that lead to his basement-level floor until they’re standing right next to the front door, on the landing, the cheap ‘welcome’ carpet getting wet from the water dripping down their bodies.

Ryoken's shirt is practically transparent by now, and he feels eyes over his body. A part of him wants to be self-conscious, about the scars, the ones that are visible and the ones that aren't, but he doesn't allow himself to be, instead sighing and smiling at Fujiki as he leans heavily against his front door, his chest heaving as if he were actually tired from that little run.

Ryoken steps just a little closer and prepares himself to say goodbye. "Fujiki—"

He doesn't get to finish.

Hands pull at the neck of his shirt, so aggressively he has no choice but to go with it or risk ending up half naked, and suddenly he's pressing Fujik up against the door, their bodies connected from head to toe. It makes Ryoken shiver harder than the rain could make him, his breath rushing out from his chest faster than a gut punch would do, and he's not the only one feeling the air around them thickening and choking them. The fists holding his shirt are shaking, and Fujiki is so close to hyperventilating it would be concerning if Ryoken didn't know his actual lung capacity.

Instead of overthinking this, pretending Fujiki meant something else by this in order to get himself out of a sticky situation, Ryoken leans into it, presses him up properly against the door and bends his neck slightly down, so that his lips will brush against Fujiki's ear. It makes him twitch, and his heart even skips a beat when Ryoken wraps an arm around his waist, lifting him up just a little, while the other ghosts over his cheek before joining it, trailing down and tickling his neck.

"Yusaku," he breathes out, his voice rough, and there goes a shiver. "I have to admit that I cheated."

Fujiki's fists tighten, so Ryoken turns his head to press his forehead against his, looking into his eyes. Fujiki looks like he's holding back a storm, and Ryoken wants to get blown away by it. He just needs to get this one thing off his chest first.

"I actually couldn't choose a third thing I like about you," he continues, and Fujiki swallows, closing his eyes for a second before opening them back up,

steeling himself for the rest. “There are too many. You drive me *insane*, and I never know what to do about it—”

Fujiki closes the space between them with a kiss. It’s too fast, has too much force behind it; their teeth clash at the start, but Ryoken is in on it and leans back, tries again for the both of them, and this time it’s good—this time, Fujiki lets go of his shirt and wraps his arms around his neck to pull him in as if it were possible to be closer. This time, Fujiki arches his back as if he can’t help it, opens his mouth for Ryoken’s tongue when the slide of their lips proves to be inefficient in appeasing the electricity running through their veins.

Ryoken’s whole body heats within seconds, and he can’t help but grunt like a proper caveman when Fujiki splits from him in order to take a deep breath, only to dive right back in. The door protests against their weight, and even more so when Ryoken slams a hand against it to ground himself better on his feet before wrapping it around Fujiki again.

It’s a familiar song and dance, something they’ve done hundreds, if not thousands of times before as different people, but Ryoken doesn’t think it’s ever felt like this before, like his body and mind and heart are one, coming together with a single touch. It feels natural for his hands to drift lower than they should, for Fujiki to let out a helpless moan of pure desperation before sinking his teeth into Ryoken’s bottom lip and pulling, for him to tighten his grip so hard it’ll probably cause bruises.

So natural, but so *new*—Revolver will never be able to kiss Playmaker again, if he ever gets the chance, and dare to compare it to this, to how much of themselves they seem to be pouring out with a single gesture. It’s like Ryoken’s lost sight of what was holding him back, and he doesn’t want to find it again.

Fujiki breaks the kiss again, with a godforsaken whine that’ll haunt Ryoken for months, and lets out words in a rush that take Ryoken a second to process over the fog in his brain: “Stay over tonight.”

Ryoken nips his lips, and he’s about to say *yes, yes, of course, why wouldn’t I*, when pounding coming through the door makes both of them jump.

Homura Takeru's voice rings out through the wood. "I'm sorry to interrupt but there are other people living here!"

Ryoken blinks at the door and then looks back at Fujiki, sure that his expression is nothing short of crestfallen, but instead Fujiki looks like he may start spitting out fire any second now.

"He doesn't even live here," he snaps, and then pulls Ryoken in for another kiss, and that one turns into a second, which turns into a third, and then the pounding on the door comes again. Ryoken is honestly in need of a cold shower or an evening alone with his hand right now, so he's almost glad for the reality check. Almost. Fujiki might kill someone the second he turns away. "I'll see you around?"

Ryoken stares at Fujiki's red lips and barely resists the urge to drag him back to his own apartment instead. Carefully, he untangles himself from Fujiki's warm body, and swallows, nodding tightly. "Definitely."

It rings again, that voice inside himself calling him liar, a hoax. He agrees with it.

Ryoken hesitates to leave for too long, but he does so in the end. Every fiber of his being is begging him to turn around the second he makes it up the stairs, but no matter how much he wants that, he can't. No matter how much it hurts, he can't. Maybe in another life—but not in this one.

He has a long day ahead tomorrow.

Yusei's phone pings with a message, and he's confident that he hasn't ever pulled it out of his pocket nearly as fast as he does in that moment, unlocking it blindly and taking in the notification on his screen, holding his breath. He isn't sure what he was expecting, but a simple '*i'm alright, don't worry*' isn't exactly it. He knows a phone call would be too much to ask for, but some more elaboration on his cousin's well-being would have been *nice*, to say the least.

Sighing, Yusei pockets his phone and stares at his desk, ignoring the files on Hanoi glaring at him from his PC screen. He technically shouldn't even *be* in his office right now, since he was rather forcefully put on vacation leave for the whole month, and pairing that with Judai having left two weeks ago on a trip to Spain has him rather shifty, almost squeamish, about what to do with his time.

He's been trying his best to take it slow, for the sake of not being put on another vacation leave, but his energy levels are entirely too high. There's only so much tuning he can do to his bike before it becomes illegal to drive it. Judai's finally returning today, which is *good*, since it means Yusei won't be invading Jack and Crow's place, for the sake of not being alone with the cat and his spiraling thoughts. He's missed him terribly, much like every time he leaves, and Yusei *was* doing well, but the news about the seismic activity in Den City pushed him into sneaking into his office, to get his mind off all the overthinking and restless pacing he does when it comes to Ryoken, that only Judai knows how to deal with.

Yusei doesn't usually act like this—he's good at keeping a level head over his shoulders even during his worst moments, but he has several soft spots, and they've all been hit this month. First, with being forced into a vacation, then with his husband leaving – Yusei could have easily gone with him, but he hates long flights and it's a work trip – and then with a bioterrorist organization deciding to attack the mountain his only remaining relative, who he practically considers his little brother, lives on.

He's stressed out, to say the least, and Ryoken's answer is *barely* encouraging. His baby cousin's definition of '*fine*' has been quite varied through the years, but Yusei knows getting Ryoken to say more than six words in a row to him is one of the biggest challenges of his life yet. Spectre had been cooperative and resourceful, as always, but that kid always is. At least Yusei has someone close to Ryoken on his side, or it would be even harder to even contact him.

He's starting to think he might need to make a visit soon. If not for his own peace of mind, since he doubts he'll ever be at peace with Ryoken making it harder and harder to have a conversation with him, then at least to make

sure Ryoken's doing alright. Besides, he's sure his coworkers in charge of the Hanoi case wouldn't mind a free pair of eyes on the field.

He'll need to think about it.

Notes for the Chapter:

i already started on the next chapter but i started with the less important plot bits so it's anyone's guess when i'll be done XD so i hope you enjoyed this chapter! do tell what you thought of the date below. thank you for reading! (also yusei appreciation is, well, appreciated)

12. performance

Notes for the Chapter:

hi hello i have four uni assignments due next week and classes just started rip me enjoy i luv u!! especially u sally!!! AND your eyes!!!

Takeru regrets helping Yusaku pick a shirt, and he regrets letting Yusaku go on that date. He also regrets eating as many snacks as he did while waiting for him to come back and giving Flame a taste for chocolate, but he guesses it *could* be worse. He's decided not to tell Yusaku about Revolver. At least, not yet. He's pretty sure Yusaku would kill him, then Revolver, and then himself, if he ruined his date night. Instead, Takeru is going to text Kogami Ryoken, put on his big boy pants, and hope that he doesn't get mortally wounded for being a threat to his cover.

He couldn't give a shit that Kogami Ryoken is in fact Revolver, but he does give a shit about Yusaku's feelings. He wouldn't call this trying to be a white knight, but rather just making sure that when Yusaku gets hurt – and he will be hurt, Takeru *knows him* – it won't be as bad as it could be. That Revolver and Kogami Ryoken haven't been faking their feelings for him all this time. That his intentions aren't all bad.

But if he does in fact turn out to be a piece of trash, Takeru will not hesitate to ruin his pretty face. He won't even blink. He will get at least one scratch in, if it's the last thing he does.

He slept over at Kusanagi-san's again, mostly because Flame was rather busy with Ai—after their nap, they had scurried off to hide somewhere in the apartment, whispering to each other like a pair of gossipy schoolgirls. He was slightly concerned about what they could be talking about, but decided not to question them for his own sake. Flame would probably tell him if it was something important, anyways. They bonded a lot last night.

He left after having breakfast, feeling somewhere between happy and worried for Yusaku. He's had this dreamy look in his eye since last night, and glared a little when he saw Takeru cooking breakfast for them all as if

still pissed at his – in his opinion, rather *necessary* – cockblocking. He mellowed out by the time Takeru was taking his leave, mentioning meeting up later after his shift at Café Nagi to discuss their next move—so, Takeru needed to have his talk with Kogami Ryoken as early as possible. Be quick to make his own chess pieces move.

“Hey, Flame,” Takeru says, taking Flame’s attention away from his collection of plushies. The Playmaker one stares at him with judging eyes, so Takeru turns it to face the wall, offering Flame his hand to climb onto in order to help him off the shelf. Flame stares at him expectantly, watching Takeru’s frown. “I just want you to know that even though I’ve only known you for a day, I really appreciate you. You’re really cool. I might die after today, so if you’d keep my merch safe after this—”

“That seems quite fatalistic, Takeru,” Flame interrupts, but otherwise he doesn’t seem disturbed. He tilts his head in consideration. “I doubt Revolver will try to kill you. It would make him suspicious.”

“I’m just being realistic!” Takeru shakes his head, walking over to his bed to sit down, letting Flame down over his pillow. “He might attack me. I can see that happening. I could be fatally wounded—you haven’t seen his arms. And his chest. Dude might not be *big*, but he’s *ripped*.”

Flame lays down on the pillow and stares at the ceiling, humming. “Aren’t you muscled as well? I fail to see the correlation.”

“I *am* ripped,” Takeru agrees. “But Revolver is like, really strong. *Really strong*. I once saw him punch Go Onizuka in the face, and the guy was bleeding afterwards. Bleeding! Do you know how hard it is to make him bleed?”

Flame blinks. “No, actually. And I still think you’re letting your emotions carry you right now. Revolver, Kogami Ryoken—he seems to be a logical person. You don’t need to mythify him. He won’t harm you, since that would bring about too many variables. He sounds like he’s more likely to try and strike a deal with you—”

Takeru sighs. “I wouldn’t be opposed to that—”

“—or kidnap you. I could see him doing that as well.”

Takeru snaps his mouth shut and frowns even harder, wondering if that was supposed to be reassuring. Either way, he needs to get this over with. He’s been stalling all morning, giving his phone nervous looks as he forcibly made himself work on that essay, as if he’d already texted Kogami Ryoken and was waiting for a response. He’s going to take a deep breath, use some of his semi-illegal vigilante courage, and call him instead.

“Flame,” Takeru breathes out, grabbing his phone off his desk and sitting back down, bouncing his knee. “Can you hold my hand?”

Flame crawls over the bed and then sits beside Takeru, tiny hands wrapping around one of his fingers. “You can do this, Takeru. You have considerable strength in you. Talking to Kogami Ryoken over the phone can’t be that frightening.”

Takeru doesn’t tell Flame he’s mostly just anxious about phone calls in general. He has to keep some dignity.

Takeru didn’t actually have Kogami’s number saved. They have a couple classes in common, sure, but they don’t really interact beyond saying hello to each other and making small talk. Takeru will admit he’s an excellent tutor, since he always has an answer to Takeru’s panicked questions before exams, but beyond that, there hasn’t been any reason for Takeru to ask for his number. They haven’t even been assigned any projects together, so Takeru had to text Miyu and *beg her* not to ask why he needed Kogami’s number, letting her assume that it was class related. Bless her heart for not making fun of him.

Not giving himself more time to put it off, Takeru hits the call button, bringing his phone up to his ear.

It rings three times, then a fourth, and for a second Takeru thinks that Kogami might not pick up, since it is an unknown number to him, but halfway through the fifth ring, it cuts off, his gravelly voice coming through. “Hello?”

Takeru hesitates, panic about being in some deep shit hitting him full force, but somehow, he pushes through it. “Hello, Kogami-kun? Uh, this is Homura Takeru—”

“Ah,” Kogami interrupts his voice shifting, becoming lighter, friendlier. Takeru can’t believe he never noticed that the only difference between him and Revolver is a lower register, a mask that doesn’t even hide his chin, and tight clothing. They’re *ridiculously* blind. “Homura, sorry, I don’t have your number saved. Is there anything you need?”

Takeru pauses to think, because he really doesn’t know how to bring this up casually. “Well, yeah, actually... I’d like to speak to you about something. In person. I think that you’ll be uh, really interested.”

Takeru glances at Flame, who raises a hand and makes a ‘so-so’ gesture with it. Well, it’s *something*.

“Oh, well,” Kogami sounds intrigued, but Takeru can tell he’s about to brush him off—probably thinking he wants some tutoring. He can’t really blame him. He struggled through that essay. “See, I’m a little busy right now, so I don’t know—”

“Listen, Kogami-kun,” Takeru rushes out in a breath, trying to steel his voice. It’s not quite as easy to act like a vigilante when he’s not dressed like one. It must be a placebo effect. “I think It’d be best for both of us if we met, today, as soon as possible. You really don’t want to want to miss this.”

A tense silence fills the line, for too many seconds for it to be casual. When Kogami speaks next, his voice is deeper again. Takeru wonders if it’s a conscious thing he does, or if he’s just that good at naturally separating part of himself. It makes him question which one is the true him. Which one has been the charade; the vigilante or the trust fund baby?

His tone makes him lean towards the former. “Homura-kun, what are you exactly implying?”

The honorific makes Takeru clench his jaw, as does the barely hidden tension behind his voice, and this, he’s more familiar with; Soulburner

hasn't really *fought* Revolver, because he's had no reason to and sometimes it's fun to work with him, but he's argued with him a few times, so he knows how he sounds when he's giving him a warning to back off. This tone almost sets him at ease, as he's now swimming in familiar waters.

"I know who you are," Takeru says, deciding that it's best to go straight to the point, trying to not leave any room for argument. He's never been good at word games, the way Revolver is. He hears Kogami take a deep breath and hold it, waiting for Takeru to deliver the rest of his lines. "I don't know how none of us noticed before, but it's obvious you're *him*. I haven't told anyone, if that's something you're worried about—but I'd like to know your intentions. See if that can help me decide whether I'm telling Yusaku or not."

Silence again, this time longer, and then Kogami lets out a sigh that sounds amused, yet defeated. "I always knew you had it in you, but I should have given you more credit. I didn't expect you to be the first one to figure it out."

He sounds mostly the same now, but something's shifted—Takeru realizes, somewhere between amazement and disheartenment, that he's stopped feigning innocence, that edge of danger that seems permanently attached to Revolver's voice shining through. He's stopped pretending to be a character, some sort of understudy of a person that doesn't really exist. This is real, and actually *happening*. He really blew Revolver's – at the very least – five-years-long cover. Takeru has a few seconds to wonder why he isn't trying to deny it further, but the answer's easy enough; Kogami won't risk him making claims like this to anyone, even if they don't believe him. Sometimes, a seed is all it takes.

"You're a good actor," Takeru ends up answering, and shrugs, looking at Flame again. He's giving him a thumbs-up now. "I didn't want to believe it at first."

Kogami hums. "What gave it away?"

Takeru almost doesn't want to tell him—but he's earned it, for fooling all of them. For fooling *Yusaku*. "I don't think this is something anyone would

notice, Kogami-kun... but you're just too sad. I don't think you'd be able to change that. Also, I saw you knocking a dude out cold from one punch the other night. Pretty badass, but telling. And you killed the guy that shot you, too, which isn't nearly as badass. That was just cold. And unnecessary."

Kogami snorts, and he gets the impression that anger is building somewhere under the surface, but it's not directed at Takeru. It's directed at himself, for being discovered. Other than that, he can tell there's a smile in his voice. It's bizarre, but Takeru's glad he's not being threatened yet. He's sure it'll come.

"Well then, hot-head," Kogami says, in that tone Revolver so often uses when he knows something they don't, or when he finds something particularly hilarious. Takeru ignores how he can now hear the tell-tale despair under it. The last thing he wants is to build up pity for him, when he doesn't know the whole story—and understanding Revolver's morbid sense of humor isn't exactly a priority. "Name a time and place, and I'll meet you there. Do try to keep it private, yet public enough that I won't punch your teeth out."

Despite the threat, Takeru grins. "You know the old arcade in that mall downtown?"

Kogami groans, knowing exactly what he means. Takeru can't fault him for it—if he's going to have this conversation, he's not going to do it with an empty stomach, and he'll have some fun while he's at it.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Flame whispers, but Takeru isn't listening.

Hours later, he'll realize he should have.

Aoi's quiet weekend gets interrupted by her phone ringing at around five a.m. At her side, Miyu groans, turning away from her and hiding her head under her pillow, clearly not intending to get up at this hour, but Aoi has little choice in the matter, having to mentally prepare herself for a few seconds before standing up and answering.

“Something came up,” Akira says to her, as Aoi steps out of the bedroom and heads to the kitchen. She’ll need to have a quick breakfast. “One of the new devices we’ve been working on picked up a signal, which none of us were expecting. We need you to head to the location and see what you can find.”

Aoi sighs, holding her phone against her ear with her shoulder in order to pour herself some cereal. “Did it have to be me?”

“It’s important enough that if you do find something, we want you to be around as a cover,” Akira pauses, hesitating. It’s so early, Aoi can barely think, and this is already giving her a headache. She planned to go out with Miyu again today, since their dinner last night had been sidetracked by them eavesdropping on Fujiki and Kogami, who didn’t even notice they were there, just a couple tables over. But it seems that won’t be happening. “Ghost Girl and Onizuka will be keeping you company. You have an hour to get to my office.”

Aoi wonders when exactly the last time Akira called just to ask her how she was doing was, but she buries the thought. She signed her life away, and she doesn’t regret it, since it gives her a chance to be useful, to hold responsibility. She just wishes she could get a bit of a break, but SOL doesn’t have enough resources to pour into another product like Blue Angel yet. Go was enough proof of it.

She eats her cereal as fast as she can, takes a freezing cold shower, and brings nothing with her on her way out, only stopping to enter their bedroom again and kiss Miyu on the forehead, not turning on any light. There’s a car waiting outside, like always, inconspicuous in the way it’s parked, like it’s been there all night, the windows completely tinted. Aoi keeps her head down, the hood of her jacket over her head, and opens the backseat door, getting in without hesitation.

The car drives before she’s even closed the door, and when she turns towards the front she’s greeted by Emma’s sleepy grin, and Go’s disgruntled expression, sitting on the opposite seat to hers.

“Morning, Emma-san, Onizuka-san” Aoi mumbles, bowing her head at the both of them, but Emma stands up, her back bent, to turn around and sit beside her, patting Aoi’s shoulder and maintaining her smile.

“No need to be so formal,” she says, nudging her with her elbow, but Aoi finds it hard to relax—missions are always like this, awkward and stressful. Go’s silence is much easier to deal with than Emma’s cheerful nature; Aoi can tell something good happened to her recently just from the way she’s carrying herself, shoulders straight and gestures confident. She would be jealous if she didn’t know exactly what kind of things make Emma this happy, even at five in the morning. As if to prove her point, Emma turns towards Go, crossing her arms. “Now, Go, dear, do cheer up. You *are* getting paid.”

Go grunts in response, and that’s the extent of the conversation. Emma makes small talk with her, but it’s frivolous at best, her mind clearly on the paycheck. She never asks Aoi much about her private life, despite the fact that she’s definitely involved with her brother in some way, but Aoi prefers it that way, sometimes. Go, on the other hand, looks out the window in silence—he used to be much easier to work with, but the last few years have hit him hard. He doesn’t seem to be thriving as a body for hire.

The car enters the parking lot of SOL Technologies and drops them off at the employees’ only entrance. Hayami-san is already waiting for them there, opening the door with her keycard and guiding them up as if it was their first time here, but Aoi’s tired of arguing with Akira about protocol. Much of this isn’t even under his control, anyways. There aren’t many employees in the building, as they’re guided through the halls and upstairs to Akira’s office, and it gives an eerie feeling to the empty offices and cubicles they walk past, the hum of the air ventilation system that’s usually not noticeable, to the clinical structure of this place; It makes Aoi shiver—she isn’t a fan of the business part of things, even if Akira’s made sure she understands them.

Akira isn’t alone in his office when the door is opened for them, and Aoi sees Emma struggling to not turn up her nose as Queen looks them over. Aoi wants out the second their eyes meet, wishing she could step out like

Hayami-san did, as Queen's expression shifts from nonchalant to a grin that could only be described as sharp and eager. Like a spider about to eat you.

Akira stands from behind his desk, clearing his throat. "I'm glad you could all make it. To begin, let me clarify that we have very little preparation today. This is mostly a mission to obtain information via your visual input, in order to continue with further development of the device that picked up on this. As such, you'll have to report everything to us. It shouldn't take more than a couple of hours, at most."

Go scoffs, crossing his arms. "And you needed three people for that?"

Akira opens his mouth, but Queen beats him to it, her voice a sarcastic drawl. "A valid point. Perhaps we should not take these additional security measures, after all, and give Emma here a raise for the trouble. Don't you think so, Zaizen?"

Aoi bites her tongue, and watches her brother sigh, shaking his head. Being around Queen is always... an experience. Go looks about ready to walk out on them, fists clenched. Emma, for her part, looks like she's not opposed to the idea. She seems to be the only one unaffected by Queen's need to demean them, but Aoi can't exactly envy her for that—it just means Emma loves the drama, despite how little she likes Queen.

"Let's settle down," Akira starts, walking around his desk to stand between the three of them and Queen, like a buffer. "I know it might sound excessive, but if our radar is correct, then what you find would absolutely need all of your strengths to obtain, since we're not confident in its nature. If any of you wants to pull out now, we won't hold it against you, and the company will look forward to working with you in other situations. Is that alright by all of you?"

"Ah, well, you know I'm always up for a fun time," Emma chuckles, winking at Akira—he resolutely doesn't react, just turning his eyes towards Go, who thinks about it for a moment before shrugging, his eyes narrowed in warning. Emma pats his back. "See, no need to get riled up."

Akira doesn't look at Aoi, because they both know she has no choice, and Queen hums, standing up from her seat, looking over all of them with a sneer, straightening her suit jacket with her hands. "Get ready. I'm looking forward to your good results."

She walks out of the room, then, her heels clicking away like a bad imitation of dramatic movie scenes. Aoi sometimes wonders if Queen really does think she lives in a movie where she's the main villain, or if she's just that obnoxious in her day to day life too, but the thought doesn't really linger in her mind for too long—she doesn't make a habit of thinking about trash for long periods of time.

Akira lets out another sigh, this one of relief, his shoulders relaxing before he's back at standing straight, addressing Go. "I'm sorry about that. She's excited about this discovery, and the rest of the higher ups are keeping an eye on all of us. It's been a chaotic few hours."

"It's fine," Go grunts out, shrugging one shoulder, and tilting his head towards Aoi. "We can't let her go alone anyways, can we? Your people don't like that."

"I'm perfectly capable of dealing with this by myself," Aoi blurts out, crossing her arms. Everyone turns towards her, since she hasn't said a word since she got there, but she's honestly sick of the higher ups wanting everything to be a publicity stunt, even when there's going to be no public around. Go's attitude is the last thing she wants. Emma opens her mouth, probably to try and lighten the mood, but Aoi cuts her off, looking at her brother and snapping out her words. "Are we going, then?"

Akira looks like he wants to say something to her, other than what's appropriate, but he doesn't. "Yes. The three of you should get ready. I'll give you a briefing when we arrive at the scene, since we aren't allowed to share a lot of information."

There's nothing new about that, really. Half the time, Aoi doesn't know why she's doing what she's doing, but she hardly finds reason to complain about it, if it allows her to help more people and feel a little less left out. She doesn't really care about what SOL does, in the end, because she

mostly trusts her brother to tell her if they need to escape a bad situation, or a bad deal. Aoi's heard the rumors, of course, since it's impossible not to when working with Emma, of SOL supplying technology to the black market—she asked Akira about it once, and he said she shouldn't poke where she isn't called, or they could both get fired.

Aoi can't afford to be fired. Not because of money, since SOL has given her proper compensation for the work she's done and it's more than she knows what to do with, but because it would leave her properly stranded. Blue Angel is her life now, or at least a big chunk of it. She can't abandon her. It's not like Aoi doesn't have morals, sure, but Akira taught her how to work around them a long time ago. If he doesn't pull out, then she won't, either.

Getting ready to be Blue Angel is always a bit of a hassle, even if Aoi enjoys it. It hurts a lot, to get it right in the mirror, having to keep her eyes open to make sure her features shift accordingly even though it makes her nauseous to watch it happen, but then she gets to throw a little make-up on, to compensate, gets the rest of her appearance from a cloaking device strapped to her wrist that she doesn't understand but also doesn't question —she just needs her hair blue, and that's it. Sometimes she envies Emma's far simpler process: a mask, clip-on hair extensions that she doesn't even bother with half the time, a skin tight suit that covers her from head to toe.

The lab designed a new outfit this time, despite her task not being one that will reach the public, as far as she can tell. It's on the side of practical, thankfully, a sleeveless bodysuit with a high, rectangular neck, with boots up to her calf, the soles ideal for hiking. Aoi likes the cute dresses more than she'd probably admit, but these outfits are more comfortable, make her feel better about getting in the air, even if they're always just a bit too tight.

Emma approves, when Aoi comes back to the dressing room from the lab. "Hm, you look less like an angel today... I like that, makes you more intimidating."

"I just look grown up," Aoi shrugs, glancing at her nails. The cloaking device makes them look like they're painted, for some reason—the lab most

certainly thinks of her as their doll. “How many years do you think I have left before they think I’m too old?”

Emma seems taken aback by the question, but not exactly shocked that she’s asked it. It’s likely that she was expecting her to at some point, just not today, and her eyes quickly soften, turning sympathetic. “To be honest, I don’t know. They always tell you to look younger—if I had a trick like that, I would probably get myself a job like yours, but you know—I’d say twenty-six is a good bet for you.”

“That’s not a whole lot of time,” Aoi mumbles, looking down at her boots. She’s twenty-three, and at the pace she’s going, three years will pass in a blink. “Will they make the new girl look like me?”

“Doubtful,” Emma sighs, crossing her arms. There’s a tension to her shoulders that betrays her nonchalant tone, like she doesn’t really want to be talking about this, like she cares more than she lets on. “Companies like new toys, after all. But you can always work with me, if you want.”

Aoi looks away from her, looking in the mirror, at the hair cascading down to her waist and the unrealistic perfection of her skin, at the glitter they insisted she use, despite it being bad for the field she’s in. “Not as Blue Angel.”

“Not as Blue Angel,” Emma repeats, chuckling. “What a brand name.”

They meet up with Go at SOL’s back exit, the one that’s underground and leads into an abandoned subway line that SOL bought to restore but isn’t actually working on. They get into a nondescript van from there, that hides a whole communication center inside it, and start driving out of town, towards the woods. Akira sits in the passenger seat, while the three of them scatter in the back. Emma is looking at the tech inside the vehicle as if she might consider stealing some of it, sitting right at the desk, while Go occupies the chair beside her, watching her like a hawk. There’s a bench against the opposite wall of the van that Aoi decided to sit on in order to close her eyes and rest for the remainder of the ride—it’s barely been two hours since she woke up, maybe three.

Guilt eats at her mind, regarding Miyu. They were supposed to go out shopping today, since Miyu suddenly regained a desire to paint ever since she came back from her morning spent with Kogami Ryoken. Aoi didn't ask much about what they did, but Miyu told her a little—hiking, mountain climbing, swimming, eating. Aoi doesn't judge what she isn't telling her, because she can't tell Miyu a lot either, but she worries it'll cause strain between them. She doesn't know how to deal with that.

Aoi is about to dive deep into her inability to manage her relationship, but Emma interrupts that line of thought by speaking up. "You know, I asked Revolver if he wanted to join us today, but he ignored my texts really hard. Didn't the big wigs *love* his work last time, Akira-san?"

Akira doesn't look towards the back of the van, keeping his eyes on the road, but Aoi can tell he's miffed. "They were interested in him, but Revolver seems to have different priorities. Contract offers are still on the table, if you manage to speak to him again."

"Oh, as if that guy would sign himself away, even temporarily," Emma shakes her head, sighing. "Such a shame, too, he's great to work with. A real gentleman, and attractive too! Totally a killer type..."

Akira is tense now, very obviously so, at Emma's attempts to blur the line between work and pleasure. Aoi wonders if Akira knows about the other guy Emma's seeing, as he never seems bothered when she brings him up, but Aoi doesn't actually want to ask. It would probably be an awkward conversation.

"He's effective," Akira nods, and promptly decided to change the subject. "We're almost at the site. Blue Angel will be observing from above, Ghost Girl will handle the radar, and Go will be the manpower in case we find something. I'll monitor you all from here. The whole operation will be recorded, so I ask for professionalism."

Emma huffs at the apparent jab at her, but doesn't offer any protest. They're handed their earpieces, let out of the van, and told where to go from there. They're in a wooded area that Aoi hasn't really been to before, but she believes this is the dirt backroad bus lines avoid that leads to Domino City,

so she pays close attention to instructions in order to not get lost, even if she could easily find her way back. Emma leads them through the woods with the device Akira trusted her to test out, while Blue Angel and Go observe, but there doesn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary for a forest. It's about an hour of fruitless walking later that Akira gives her the green light to get in the air and observe from above, once they're in what Emma calls the '*hot area*', but even then she can't really distinguish anything unusual.

Eventually, Emma stops, and notifies Akira that there's nothing here. Go says the same, and even though the wind is hitting her ears quite viciously from his high up, she can make out Akira's disappointed sigh.

"That's fine. This was just to make sure the radar was properly working, which it doesn't seem to be," he says, and fails to hide the stress under those words. Aoi can already picture Queen's tongue-lashing. "We should head back now, make good time—"

The rest of Akira's words are cut-off by a strong gust of wind, making Blue Angel's hair hit her face. She's unprepared for it, so it makes her lose her balance in the air, the propulsion sending her north of where they are, probably several meters away. Emma must have noticed, since she asks if she's okay, so Aoi settles on top of a tree in order to remove her hair from her face and get it out of her mouth. Honestly, she should have asked for a hair tie—

A viscous sound reaches her ears, and Aoi freezes from head to toe, wondering if she imagined it. She looks down at the ground, but can't really see anything weird in between the branches, no birds or other animals that could make a noise like that—so she looks up, towards the trees beside her that stand taller, and almost falls off the branch she's on when she processes what she's seeing.

It's egg shaped, maybe. It looks like it might have been, once, but it's now deformed, and Aoi can tell that the noise was caused by her weight on the branch, making it come in contact with the tree branch the egg is perched upon. Akira is calling her name now, but Aoi is at a loss for words, trying to make sense of what she's seeing. It looks as slimy as the viscous sounds from before would imply, shining with inherent wetness under the morning

sun, dots of what look like bird pokes littering the whole surface, feathers sticking to it.

It makes her a little queasy, the whole energy radiating off of it and the sight, so she clears her throat, finally answering her concerned calls of her name. “Guys, I—I think the radar might just need recalibrating.”

“What?” Akira asks, his voice unusually loud with confusion and surprise. “Did you find something?”

“It—it looks like an egg? A cocoon? It’s perched on a tree, a little north of where Emma is,” Aoi grimaces at it, floating off the branch to look closely at it and scrunching up her nose. “Akira, it smells a little like death. What *is* this thing?”

Emma and Go remain quiet, apparently just as shocked that they found anything at all, even if it was an accident, and Akira does so for a few seconds, in which Aoi leans back from her inspection. It really does smell like something died in there, which isn’t really encouraging as to what it is.

“An Ignis. You found an Ignis,” Akira says, finally, with an air of awe to his voice, but the unsettling feeling in Aoi’s gut does not disappear. If anything, it gets worse. She doesn’t like this, but Akira seems to feel the opposite of that, a smile coming in through his voice. “Good job, team. I’ll notify Queen to get a full team on location.”

Aoi swallows, nodding. “Can I come down now?”

Akira gives her permission, so Aoi lands next to Emma and Go, and leads her to the tree per her request. You can’t really see it from below, because of the branches, unless you’re looking for it—the color of that egg blends almost seamlessly with the trees, almost as if someone put it there on purpose. She doesn’t think that’s a good thing.

“Well,” Emma says, smiling, but it looks forced, fake. She doesn’t like it either, and the corners of Go’s lips are turned down, a wrinkle on his forehead. Suddenly, Aoi doesn’t feel like being Blue Angel every day is worth it. “Better get to work, huh?”

“So,” Takeru points his French fry at Kogami, ignoring the way he stares at it, unimpressed. “Spill.”

The arcade is loud, children running around and older people, like them, trying to break their high scores at their games of choice, lights blinking over their faces. This place is quite old, so it has a large variety of machines from old school to some of the newest stuff, and the fact that its basement level helps give them some semblance of privacy, while not being entirely alone. It’s been a hot spot for him ever since Takeru moved to the city, and the familiarity makes him feel more confident.

Takeru honestly didn’t think about the location that much—he just wanted to have lunch and procrastinate some more on his school work, but Flame had mentioned it being a good choice when they first arrived, and he has to say he agrees. He probably should have left Flame at home instead of bringing him over to a meeting with Revolver, but Takeru didn’t feel good about leaving him alone, and he didn’t have a good excuse to leave him with Yusaku so that he wouldn’t suspect things.

He’ll make sure not to mention him, and Flame is good at following suggestions, so he won’t show himself either.

“You seem to be under the impression that your discovery somehow means I’ll just tell you all about my plans,” Kogami says, tilting his head. He has not touched his burger yet, which is bugging Takeru, since he’s already halfway through his own. It’s making him self-conscious, so he points insistently at it. Kogami raises an eyebrow and takes a bite, slowly, as if to make it evident he’d rather be anywhere else. It’s kinda rude. “I’m just here to make sure you don’t do something stupid with this information. I’m willing to give you just about anything you want if you shut your mouth and forget about this.”

Takeru hums, picking up his drink and playing with the straw as he thinks. One of Kogami’s eyes twitches with the sound it makes, which has Takeru holding back a snort.

“I honestly don’t want anything,” Takeru shrugs, taking a sip, then dipping three fries into ketchup and bringing them into his mouth. They’re kind of dreadful, really, soggy and a bit too salty, but Takeru likes them all the same. Kogami just keeps looking at him with judgmental eyes. “Well, I guess I do want something; I want you to tell me what you know about the Ignis and what Hanoi wants with them, and whether you’re playing with Yusaku or just really, really bad at love.”

Kogami clenches his jaw so hard Takeru fears for his teeth. “Are you kidding me? You want *gossip*? ”

Takeru squints. “I wouldn’t call the Ignis gossip. Or the fact that I’m seriously worried you’re just going to turn around and step on Yusaku’s heart by revealing you’ve just been using him this whole time.”

“*Why the fuck would I—*” Kogami starts, heated, then interrupts himself with a heavy sigh, closing his eyes. Takeru can practically see his soul trying to escape his body. “Whatever I do with Fujiki, it’s none of your business. And I’ll be *damned* before I give you information on Hanoi *for free*. ”

Takeru scoffs. “Listen, buddy, Yusaku’s my best friend so I think it’s only fair that I know about your dirty tricks and information we’ve been asking you to give us for ages anyways, in exchange for not getting it over with and just telling him who you are, probably breaking his heart in the process—not that you telling him wouldn’t break it anyways, but I think he’d rather hear it from *you*. ”

Takeru’s not nearly as nervous as he was before making that phone call. He guesses it’s the rather grim reality of it; he has no choice but to accept that Revolver’s been right under their noses this whole time, and that he’s involved with Yusaku to the point of practically dating. That he knows personal details about them, from where they live to which classes they take, and where they work. If Takeru hadn’t known both sides of him previously, he’d probably be freaking out.

But, he has his big boy pants on, Flame silently observing and supporting him from his jacket pocket, and too many fucks to give about Hanoi *and*

Yusaku to allow himself to be any more terrified. He might still be slightly worried Revolver will bare his teeth and bite, but it's a risk he's willing to take.

Takeru takes Kogami's silence as a chance to look at him closely. He's tense, but he doesn't seem to be that angry; rather, Kogami gives off the impression, as always, that he's internally torn about something. It clings to him like his own personal raincloud, lingers on the downturned corners of his lips and the firm line of his shoulders, like he's used to it and doesn't even notice it anymore. Takeru can't spare any sympathy for him, not yet—but even he can tell that there's something haunted behind his eyes. It's a wonder he didn't notice it before, but it could be that Kogami Ryoken is simply not bothering to fake it right now.

Kogami sighs, shaking his head. "I'll eventually tell Fujiki about this, alright? I've always planned to do so. But I need to deal with the Ignis first, and I can't have him *and* your ridiculous hotdog truck crew screwing around with what I've been doing for years."

"We could help," Takeru resists the urge to roll his eyes, leaning over the table so he can make full eye contact. Kogami meets him head on, but he's guarded, trying to make Takeru back off. He won't bite. "Seriously, we could. I don't know what you've been doing, what you're planning, but you don't need to take them on alone. We want to take them down, too."

"You have no reason to get involved *at all*," Kogami hisses from between his teeth, and then suddenly springs up, standing, looking at Takeru with an expression that could only be described as vicious, from the way his eyebrows push together and his mouth curls. "You're all *fools*. You don't even understand what you're dealing with, can't see you're in danger, and can't even *accept* that someone else is already taking care of it and trying to make your lives easier—"

He pauses, cutting himself off with a quick breath, and his head snaps upwards, at the ceiling. Takeru has about a dozen complaints about what he just said right on the tip of his tongue, but the way Kogami's demeanor shifts makes him bite them down, confused.

“Do you hear that?” He asks, his voice closer to alarm than Takeru’s heard in a while. He stands, frowning and tilting his head, but all he can catch is the sounds of the arcade and the people around them. If he stretches his hearing out as far as it will go, Takeru can just about hear the sound of the rest of the people in the higher levels of the mall, above them and in the parking lot, but there’s nothing that strikes him as odd. Kogami looks pale now, and it’s actually making him concerned. “It’s like a ticking clock. *Look for it.*”

Takeru shakes his head. “Are you trying to change the subject or something? Because it’s not really working and your acting is freaking me the fuck out—”

“Look for it, dammit!” Kogami steps around the table and grabs Takeru’s shoulders, his grip tight enough to make Takeru flinch. There’s actual panic in his voice now—Takeru swallows, his tongue seemingly frozen in his mouth. “Forget it, we better just get out of here, we can’t risk sticking around to warn people—”

It’s then that Takeru hears it, picking up on it as Kogami all but pushes him toward the arcade’s entrance: it’s close to a wristwatch, but not quite, and it hadn’t been there when they arrived. It makes him stumble over his own feet as he connects Kogami’s panic to it, and feels his own raising in his chest. There’s no way, right? This mall is *safe*. Security is abundant and strict; Takeru once got in trouble for being too rowdy when he was spending a day here in the arcade with Jin. New Domino used to be such a badland for so long after the destruction of the city that the whole country had to take certain security measures in even the most casual of places, and both him and Kogami have good instincts, good hearing, good awareness even when they’re being casual.

They couldn’t miss a *bomb*, could they?

Kogami suddenly freezes, tilting his head, turning towards Takeru, eyes frantic, and he *knows*.

“Homura,” Kogami starts, his voice barely above a whisper. Takeru is glad he’s still grabbing him, because fear is quickly overwhelming him,

uncharacteristic for this kind of situation but the rollercoaster of emotions has taken him completely by surprise. There's no *time*, is there? They're both unprepared. They have no gear. "Homura, *hold your breath.*"

"What?"

And then an explosion rings out, four floors above them, and Kogami is pushing him into the ground, crawling over him, slapping a hand over Takeru's mouth and nose and positioning himself so that he covers most of his body with his own. Takeru doesn't even get to try and take off Kogami's hand before he hears more explosions going off, one after another, from the highest floor to the lowest, and the building *shakes*. Kogami makes eye contact with him, and a single thought rings out through Takeru's mind as the whole mall comes down on them:

Fuck.

Yusei stares at his laptop screen and groans out loud, staring at the file he most definitely shouldn't have brought home about Hanoi.

"You know," Judai starts, coming back from the bathroom and throwing himself onto the bed, stretching to let his limbs pop before relaxing, scooting over to lean his head against the bed's backrest and peer at Yusei's laptop. "You could call him from my phone. I don't think he has my number, so he'd probably answer."

"I don't think Ryoken would appreciate that," Yusei mumbles, and closes his laptop. Not only should he not have these files, but he shouldn't let Judai read them, husband or not. "Am I being desperate?"

Judai hums, closing his eyes, and rests his chin on Yusei's shoulder. "Nah. You're just worried, and with reason. You know who his dad was."

Yusei does, for sure. He was shocked when he first read the Hanoi files, six years ago, when there were rumors of yet another leadership change inside the organization flying around work. Ryoken was four long years gone from his home by then, back to Den City, leaving Yusei with a twisted feeling in

his gut that hasn't loosened up one bit since, and only got worse when it started to get harder to get Ryoken on the phone. When Hanoi started making underground moves after at least a year of little to no activity, paired with the rumors he heard, Yusei got curious—and that's when he realized that he'd done a bad, awful, terrible job at helping Ryoken during the time he stayed with them, four years too late. The last six have been a well-deserved period of failed attempts to keep a tab on him.

Yusei had no clue that his uncle, however reluctant he was to call him that, had actually kept pursuing the ideas that caused the city-wide destruction of old Domino City. After his aunt's passing, it became complicated to even set foot in Den City without the man somehow getting up in arms about it, actively trying to keep him from visiting Ryoken. He barely even allowed Ryoken to attend his wedding, and that was after a *lot* of arguments and a lot of pushing. Ryoken had barely been thirteen; it had hardly seemed like it would be so difficult to have him there, but Kogami Kiyoshi always... impressed, in the worst way possible. He still remembers the judgmental remarks he made about Judai, and they boil his blood to this day.

Yusei knew that he was a twisted man, but to start a terrorist organization that seemed to have developed into cult status wasn't exactly what he had in mind. He thought he had a chance to get Ryoken away from whatever life Kiyoshi was secretly making him live through, but after a year he had just... left.

He could have stopped him. In fact, he *should have* stopped him, but he had a hard time keeping Ryoken away from the city he grew up in. Yusei knows what it's like to be homesick, and with Ryoken being sixteen and suddenly, terrifyingly alone but for one friend he had to leave behind, he couldn't find it in himself to say no. Four years later, Kiyoshi was connected to Hanoi, pinned as its founder, and Yusei couldn't even tell Ryoken about it, since its classified information.

Ryoken is, of course, listed as a subject of interest, simply because of his father. But he's been listed as such for as long as this case has existed, and they still haven't found any excuses under which they could keep him in custody. They can't exactly request an interview without revealing classified information—Yusei doesn't know if he's relieved or terrified of

this. The possibility that Ryoken might have seen or heard things related to Hanoi when he was far too young terrifies him, makes him feel like he's failed him.

He couldn't make up any excuses to persuade him to move back with him, back then, and watching from New Domino, trying to keep contact, Ryoken did seem to be doing better than he did when living with him. Yusei's visited him since, stayed for more than a couple of weeks at a time, and he seems... *fine*.

But Yusei can tell something eats at him. It's a look in his eyes that wasn't there when Ryoken was younger, and it sometimes keeps Yusei up at night. He's pretty sure ninety-percent of his stress levels are related to Ryoken in one way or another, since his life is otherwise peaceful. Yes, working in a branch of the government dedicated to dealing with the aftermath of his father's experiments with Kogami Kiyoshi could get incredibly complicated and frustrating, but it doesn't even hold a candle to his worry about Ryoken's physical and mental well-being.

Barely any of Yusei's friends got to meet him when Ryoken came to live with them, despite being here for a year. Apart from school, he was holed up in his room, refused to come out, refused to let Yusei hang around him for too long, and there was also that Russian roulette incident that still gives him nightmares. Judai was the only one who was *there*, that saw everything, that managed to be around Ryoken without being kicked out, that took that full year off work just to support them both, because Yusei could *not* put into words how hard and painful it was, to watch someone he loves become what Ryoken was. Judai was a rock, and Yusei can barely stomach the thought of talking about Ryoken in depth if it isn't with him.

He thinks of the adoption agencies and waiting lists, of Ryoken being older than he was when he got married, and rubs his forehead. Time flies, and the biggest grief of Yusei's life is how much he's failed him.

"Would you come with me?" Yusei asks, softly, reaching for Judai's hand. Judai naturally takes it a step further, grabbing Yusei's laptop and putting it on his nightstand, pulling him in so Yusei's sitting on his lap, facing him. As easy as breathing, Yusei brings a hand to tangle in Judai's hair, feeling

some of the tension leak from his body at this embrace. “I know you just got back, but...”

“I’m not going to say no to you,” Judai chuckles, grabbing Yusei’s other hand to kiss his knuckles. Lips brush over his ring finger, over the white gold band they both use as replacement for their actual rings, as Judai makes eye contact, sighing. “It’s not like I’m not worried about him too. He’s a good kid—I’m ready to support you both, and what’s another flight?”

Yusei grins. “You just want to make him feel embarrassed again.”

“Maybe,” Judai laughs, nodding. “Not my fault he’s terrified of me.”

“I think he just likes you, and he doesn’t like that,” Yusei rolls his eyes and sighs, burying his face in Judai’s neck. “Do you think he likes me?”

“Are you thirteen?” Judai snorts, so Yusei elbows his stomach, huffing. “Ah, I mean—I think he loves you, but he can’t seem to tell you. He can’t bridge the gap. Going to him seems like the right choice.”

Yusei hums his agreement. “I’ll book us a flight for tomorrow later.”

And that is that. Judai turns on the TV and rubs Yusei’s back as they cuddle, zapping the channels until he settles on the news, yawning and mumbling something about how there’s never anything good on TV. Yusei’s starting to fall asleep, settling into a post-lunch nap, so he scoots off Judai’s lap to lay over his chest, listening to his heartbeat, thinking about what he’ll do once he gets to Den City—he hopes that Ryoken doesn’t just disappear, like he did when Yusei had to take a flight there, ten years ago, in a panic.

He’s starting to lose consciousness, but suddenly, Judai tenses up. “*Holy shit.*”

“Hm?” Yusei hums, and then startles out of his sleep by Judai shaking his shoulder, telling him to listen. Yusei doesn’t sit up, just turns his body towards the TV and opens his eyes, and he’s glad for it, as he watches a live

news coverage of a mall that he vaguely remembers visiting in Den City falling down. His mouth goes dry. “What—”

He listens to the news lady. “—incoming police reports tell us that it seems the explosion was caused by bombs situated at strategic points. While the building maintains most of its infrastructure, several floors have come down, and so far there’s no information on the state of the building’s basement level. Authorities have deemed it too dangerous for them to start rescues missions now, since the structure is still too unstable, and it’s suspected that this attack was orchestrated by the terrorist group known as the Knights of Hanoi—”

“Judai,” Yusei wheezes out, his heartbeat going nuts, slowly sitting up and feeling dizzy. “Give me your phone.”

Judai says something about getting a plane, handing Yusei his phone as asked, and then leaving the bed. Yusei can’t look away from the TV screen, after ringing Ryoken’s phone number from memory, as more footage of the wreck is shown, as policeman and firefighter and rescue forces are interviewed, but he doesn’t process any of the words.

He can only hear the sounds of his calls going straight to voicemail every single time he redials, his heart sinking to his stomach at the same time a knot forms in his throat—burying his head in his hand when it stops ringing, stops going to voicemail, and the line just dies.

Notes for the Chapter:

if u liked this lowkey juuyuu/starshipping allow me to plug my starshipping fic..... it's a long baby

but i hope u guys enjoyed! pls tell me what u think so i can survive uni till december. luv u.